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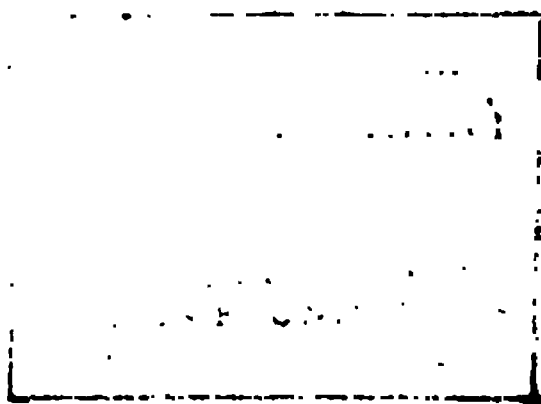
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DABNEY TODD

1.



"'PEARS TO ME, NEEVEY, YOU GIT YOUNGER THE OLDER YOU
ARE. . . . IF I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WAS 'MOST AS OLD AS ME,
I'D SAY YOU WAS 'BOUT TWENTY-FIVE."



DABNEY TODD

BY
FRANK N. WESTCOTT

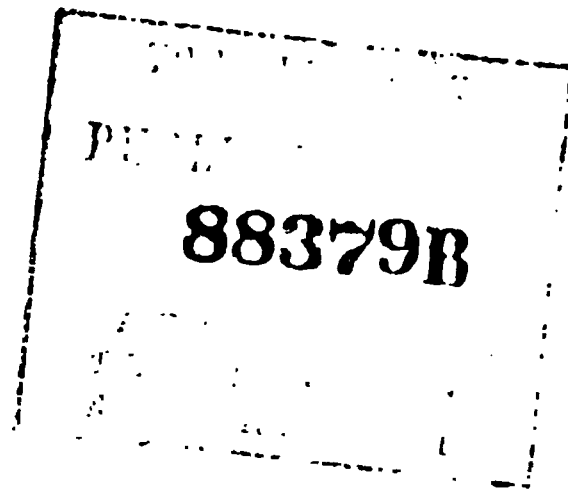
AUTHOR OF
HEPSEY BURKE
A SISTER TO DAVID HARUM



ILLUSTRATED BY
M. V. HUNTER

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DABNEY TODD

CHAPTER I

THE DIE IS CAST

IT was a drizzly, uncomfortable sort of afternoon. Half a dozen men, vaguely exhaling the atmosphere of the barnyard, as Theosophists assure us our mortal bodies are haloed by the unseen psychic aura, were gathered in Link Watkins' store, busily engaged in doing nothing at all.

Since it was too wet for plowing, or for any other work than mending harness in the barn, and not the kind of weather in which a wise farmer would take his horses out, what more natural than for those who lived within easy reach of the village to drop into the store to gossip until chore time?

Though late spring, the rain had injected a chill into the air. Therefore a cheerful wood fire blazed in the big sheet-iron stove. Several feet in high-laced boots rested on the iron ring around its base,

and the atmosphere was foggy with the fumes of strong tobacco.

A good-looking young man, his lithe form clad in a gray sweater and overalls, was painting the ceiling with long, deliberate sweeps. He was so tall that he did not require a ladder. Instead, he stood on the counter, whence he reached his work without effort. At the same time he frequently took part in the conversation which flowed steadily along below.

A large tin can of blue paint hung on his left arm. He dipped in his brush and wiped it off on the edge of the can at intervals with the unhurried precision of a man who meant to do a good job if it took all summer.

Leaning against the counter, his hat pushed back and a cigar in a corner of his mouth, was Link Watkins himself. He left the business of the store to his assistant, Dory Benton, who, gray-bearded, reticent and watchful of trade, doled out to casual customers everything from dried beans to rat-traps, heedless of the frivolity around the stove. The cash register jingled intermittently, and Link had plenty of time to "visit" while still making money.

As often happens in a small settlement like this village of New Canaan, far up in the lake country of New York State, the subject under controversy in

the store was a new departure in the church. And church gossip, particularly that concerning the church choir, was a never-failing conversational spring, which flowed freely as long as a few customers were gathered in Link's store.

"We're gettin' grand op'ry in our service since the new organist come," declared Spencer Howe, crossing one leg over the other with an air of finality. "When I seen that long-haired feller from Redburn carry his violin into the church last Thursday, I knowed there was goin' to be somethin' what couldn't be called spiritual. An', by jodey! you know what happened Sunday."

"It's Frank Lester, the new organist, what done it," observed Titus Showell, taking his pipe from his lips, and hurriedly putting it back again. "A fiddle surely can't be called Script'ral. I dunno as I ever heerd of one bein' played in the Bible — or in this town till last Sunday."

"Nat'rally you didn't," agreed Howe. "It's allers harps, an' trumpets, an' timbrels, an' hosannas, an' things like that. Not squealin' catgut. Why, it's a insult to th' Lord! He 'ain't pleased by no sech new-fangled notions, but wants salvation to run in the good, ole-fashioned ways that was good enough fer our fathers an' had oughta be good enough

fer us! I aim to be a ree-ligious man, an' I'm trustin' to save my soul by doin' an' sayin' what's right. [Therefore — Gosh 'lmighty! What the —"]

A large splotch of blue paint had fallen on the back of his hand just as he had thrust it out in oratorical flourish. Before he could finish the ejaculatory sentence with which he had interrupted his moralizing, the young man on the counter came tumbling down and sprawled across his knees.

The tin can of paint flopped upside down in the lap of the peacefully-smoking Titus Showell.

"M-m-my foot slipped!" stammered the painter, slowly untangling himself. "I reckon I was too near the edge of the counter. Ain't hurt, are you, Titus?"

"'Tain't your fault if I ain't!" snapped Titus. "'Pears to me, Chet Todd, 's you'd do better t' stick to blacksmithin', which is your rightful callin'; 'stead o' tryin' to do all the paintin' an' other work in New Canaan. Jack of all trades an' master o' none, you know! Like the feller that manufactures cradles an' done fine till he tried to *fill* all his orders — then he most mis'ably failed. You may be able t' shoe a hoss — I ain't sayin' you can't — but there's many a

blacksmith who c'dn't even paint a small *picter*, let alone a store ceilin'."

Titus Showell was mad, and though he suffered Chet to wipe the paint off his knees and grunted satisfaction that most of it had fallen to the floor, instead of upon him, he continued to look at the young man as if he regarded him as a general incompetent.

As for Deacon Howe, it was evident that he had resolved to bear his cross with Christian fortitude. He rubbed the paint off his hand and continued his remarks on the decadence of the church choir as if he hadn't been disturbed at all by the untimely interruption.

"It ain't only the violin that's so bad," said he. "But the things they sing is too purty. We don't want purty tunes to lead us to salvation. The next thing you know, they'll be dancin' up there in the choir, with the fiddler callin' off."

"Mr. Blake thinks it's all right," ventured Chet, wiping a streak of blue paint down one of his cheeks and across his nose. "Since we've been singin' them anthems an' canticles, he says they's a sight more interest in his sermons than there used to be, and naturally it makes him more earnest."

“If a dominie has to depend on fiddles an’ op’ry singin’ to make him airnest, then I say he ain’t got no real call to be in the ministry,” grunted the deacon.

“Wa’al, Spence, you had a hand in bringin’ him here,” broke in another voice, as a well-built man of sixty joined the group at the stove.

He was big, this new-comer with the twinkling gray eyes and kindly smile; but the chin of him, rugged and uncompromising, and the forceful poise of his well-modeled head, gave more than a passing hint of the iron that lay underneath that smiling exterior.

“If you *will* be a warden,” he went on, “you’ve got to take the responsibilities. When you’re hitched to a plow you have to take it along, no matter where you lead it.”

“That’s all right,” grumbled Howe. “But I’m a warden in a church, not a leader of grand op’ry. An’ I ain’t no hoss hitched to a plow, nuther. If I was, I’d make a straighter furrow than some ’s I knows —’specially when it comes to ree-ligion.”

Dabney Todd threw back his head, closed the twinkling eyes and laughed until each one of the tiny little wrinkles about his likable mouth seemed to be laughing at you individually.

“ I reckon bein’ hitched to a plow ain’t no worse than bein’ hooked up to idees that’s too old-fashioned to let yer know a new thing’s good, Spence,” he said. “ The hoss-shoes we put on now-a-days ain’t the same as they was thirty years ago, an’ the nails are made diff’rent, too. But the hosses don’t complain, an’ I reckon some o’ the roadsters make better time with the new shoes than what they did with the old.”

“ Hoss-shoes ain’t ree-ligion,” retorted Howe.

“ Prejudices ain’t religion, nuther, Spence. If they was, churches would be a sight fuller than what they are. Funny thing,” he added, more seriously, “ how the world takes its religion. It’s tolerant in ’most everythin’ else but that. Men can meet together an’ talk hosses, or dogs, or crops, or business, or ’most any ole thing, an’ not quarrel serious; but when they git onto religion, which means love an’ tolerance an’ the Golden Rule if it means anythin’ at all, they’re liable to tear each other’s hearts out, over it. Men will fight for religion, write for it, an’ even die for it — they’ll do any ole thing but *live* it! ”

The warden was silenced for once, and Dabney Todd turned to Chet:

“ Say, Chet, how much longer are you goin’ to be with this paintin’ job? ”

"Guess I'll have it done this afternoon," replied Chet. "If I ain't spilled all my paint."

"Won't have time to do any work at the shop, will you?"

"I guess I will if I get through."

"All right! Come over as soon as you can. Joe Pelot's got one o' them benders of his on ag'in, an' they ain't much work bein' done in his place. None at all, I might say — for it don't matter whether a man shoes hosses for a livin', writes books, hoes potatoes or sets in the seats o' the mighty, booze will surely make him an' his job as much strangers as though they wasn't even on speakin' terms. You can't beat rum; you're trimmed at the start, in *that* race. They's two teams standin' out in front of our shop now, waitin' till Amos can 'tend to 'em. Reckon I'll have to tackle one of 'em myself if you don't git through 'fore dark, Chet."

Chet had his brush going again, by now, and grunted an affirmative *um-humph* without stopping.

"Wa'al, I'll go back an' see how Amos is gittin' along. You come on soon as you can, Chet."

Dabney Todd, his big frame seeming to take up all the spare room in the crowded store, stalked out, the door closing behind him with a bang.

"Dab ain't a bad sort of man," commented Link

Watkins to the circle around the stove. "But he ain't got the right idees 'bout religion. He don't take it ser'ous enough. Why, I seen him an' the dominie jest laughin' fit to split over in his office this mornin', and I horned in to see what it was all about."

"What was it?" asked Howe.

"It was a story Mr. Blake was tellin', an' I thought it rather scand'lous comin' from a minister."

"I didn't," interposed Chet, from his perch on the counter. "I heard it, an' it made me laugh. An' I didn't see why a minister shouldn't tell it. I ain't one o' them that thinks just because a man buttons his collar behind, he ain't human. I cal'late the more human ministers are, the better servants o' the Lord they can be. Go on, give it to 'em, Link, an' let 'em judge."

"You tell it, Chet," insisted Link. "I don't believe I could remember all o' the blamed thing."

"Well," said Chet, "it was about a sailor who went into a mission meetin' on the Bow'ry, New York, one evenin'. He felt he was sailin' the sea o' life in a leaky ship, an' fast driftin' on the shoals of iniquity, an' he wanted to get the anchor of salvation down in the harbor of repentance. Well, he heard the story about the Crucifixion, an' how it was

the Jews that did it. The sailor had never read the New Testament, an' it was all new to him. He was so struck by it that he went up to the platform an' got converted right there."

"That's likely enough," commented the Deacon. "If we hadn't all have heerd it all our lives, so that we're kinder used to it, I reckon we'd hustle up to be converted, too."

"Well," continued Chet, "after he'd had quite a talk with the minister, an' promised to come again to another meetin', he went outside. He wasn't more'n a block away from the mission house, thinkin' of what he'd heard, when a man that he could see was a Jew come walkin' along, 'tendin' to his own business an' not takin' any notice of any one. Well, what does the sailor do but haul off an' bust the Jew on the jaw, knockin' him flat."

"What did he do that fer?" asked Titus Showell, deeply interested.

"That's what the Jew asked the sailor," replied Chet. "'What did I do it for?' says the sailor. 'Why, you dirty dog, you killed Christ, an' Christ stood for the brother o' man. He wanted everybody to love their neighbor like themselves, an' if any blink-blank son of a gun don't do it, I'm goin' to prove He had the right idea by handin' 'em a

swift wallop. They either got to love their neighbors or fight *me*, see? Git away or I'll paste you again! ' "

There were some solemn nods as Chet finished the story and went on with his work. At last Link Watkins remarked, in a tone of triumph:

"There you are! Ain't that a goshawful story for a minister to tell? I don't quite see into it, but I don't think it's right for any one who preaches from a pulpit ever to talk about a man bein' busted on the jaw. It don't sound Script'ral to me."

"Mebbe not," said Chet, contemplatively, "but it seems to kind of show what a mis'able mess people make of applyin' the principles they're taught. It's a good knock at intolerance, all right, an' that's what the minister meant to illustrate by it — I heard him say so, himself. I guess he knew what he was up to, all right, when he sprung it."

Came a little silence; then:

"There's several things I don't like about Mr. Blake," declared Deacon Howe, smoking gravely.

"Wa'al," rejoined Link, "as Dabney Todd said jest now, you had most to do with bringin' him here. You an' the other officers of the church can't blame nobody else if he ain't what you thought he'd be."

"We ain't blamin' nobody," was the retort.

“ On’y I’ll say this — that I didn’t bargain for none o’ these new contraptions in the choir. We allers got along before with singers out o’ the congregation to go up there an’ render the music called for by the prayer-book, an’ to sing the hymns as they had ought to be sung. Now, we got a quartette, an’ them four folks takes all the singin’ out of our mouths. I don’t want no one to praise the Lord for me.”

“ No one tries to prevent you singin’ if you want to,” protested Chet, straightening up to his full six feet two. “ We people in the choir don’t aim to do more than lead. That’s what Mr. Blake said when he asked me to sing tenor, and he told the same thing to Pop Jayne an’ Myrtle Lewis.”

“ An’ Nance Pelot,” put in Martin Doover, a burly individual, nearly as tall as Chet, and some twenty pounds heavier. “ Why didn’t you mention Nance? ”.

There was an unpleasant grin on the broad, weather-beaten countenance of Doover, and most of those about the stove shifted uneasily in their seats.

“ If you’d give me time, Martin, I was goin’ to mention Nance Pelot,” replied Chet, looking straight into the eyes of the other. “ She is in our quartette, an’ she’s a splendid young lady.”

"Sure she's splendid!" chuckled Martin. "I heerd her sing that duet with you last Sunday, an', by gum, you looked at her as if you c'd eat her alive when she clumb to that highest note without squealin'."

"That's enough, Martin!" warned Chet.

"Oh, I dunno. I reckon we hez a right to talk about the choir, so long's we're puttin' our money in the plate every Sunday, an' helpin' to keep it up. 'Sides, I ain't said nothin' that ain't compl'ment'ry. You sing tenor like that feller I heerd in the minstrel show this winter. Old Pop Jayne makes a good stagger at the bass, an' Myrtle Lewis has a — what d'ye call it? — a contralto, that is sure some singin'. In course, Myrtle's a little flighty — allers staring about th' church, with a half-laugh on her face. You ought to tell her 'bout that, Chet. It's oncommon noticeable, with her standin' up there, right behind the preacher."

"Oh, I don't see nothin' wrong with Myrtle," put in Tite Showell. "She's young; she's at the gigglin' age; she ain't got to the gruntin' age yet. Youth will have its way. Young folks ain't like us, you know. We're always talkin' about our ailments an' sorrows; young folks has their eyes fixed on the joys o' life. Myrtle's young, an' young folks is sup-

posed to laugh, even when they's nothin' to laugh at. It keeps 'em young. Laughin' an' good temper is what wipes birthdays off the calendar 'fore they can strike in."

"It ain't only Myrtle," persisted Martin. "They's Nance Pelot. She's allers smilin' in church, 'specially when she looks at Chet."

"Well, what of it?" snapped Chet.

"On'y that there's them as thinks Nance Pelot oughtn't to be in the choir at all, considerin' the skylarkin' she's been suspected of and what's been said about her, an'—"

He got no further. For the second time that afternoon Chet Todd's brush thudded on the floor, with a bang that brought all the gossipers up standing.

Something almost electrical snapped in the air. When Chet spoke the words came like rifle shots.

"Don't you say that, Martin!"

Chet's eyes held his in strange fascination. The blue sparks blazing there blanched Martin's cheeks; and his loose, weak mouth relaxed.

"Don't say it, I tell you!"

Chet Todd was his father's son. In repose the likeness was not so noticeable; but standing there on the counter, his head thrust forward and his body

tensed, he was Dabney all over. The smile had gone and the iron was at the surface.

“I just want to tell you, Martin Doover, that Nance Pelot is a good girl! You an’ the other narrow-minded bigots of this town who go around throwin’ mud at a girl because she ain’t your kind an’ has sense enough to keep her business to herself, instead o’ lettin’ you and your pack of she-wolves paw it to pieces — well, you ain’t good enough to clean her shoes — an’ it ain’t goin’ to be healthy for nobody to say a word about her where I can hear ’em. All this scandal an’ gossip has got to stop, you hear me? The less brains a man or woman’s got, in this town, the more they talk, seems like. It’s the same as empty barrels makin’ more noise than full ones, or empty carts rattlin’ loudest along the road. Now, Doover, you know what’s what. Git out!”

“I warn’t sayin’ nothin’,” protested Martin sullenly. “That is, not more’n —”

“Git! Go now, or you won’t be able to go,” and Chet, jumping down from the counter, confronted him.

Cowed, Martin slouched away at what was, for him, rather a swift pace, and headed for his father’s farm, a good two miles out of the village.

Chet watched him as he plodded along through the mud and rain. There was a fine determination in his eyes, but his heart was sad. Too well he knew how soon the tale would be all over the village.

Not that he cared much, after all. To-day the clash had come, as he had determined it should, sooner or later. The insult had been spoken and had been flung back in Doover's teeth. Yes, and Chet thrilled with joy at knowledge that, had not prompt withdrawal been forthcoming, the issue would have been settled by gauge of battle. But Nance! Nance — would she understand? Would she realize the situation?

In God's name, why couldn't these country gossips and backbiters let her alone?

CHAPTER II

NANCE PELOT

THE rain dripped with a mournful sob from the rusty eaves of the little brown down-at-the-heel place which served as a rectory for New Canaan's old-fashioned Episcopal Church.

The church itself had been standing more than a hundred years, and the traditions thereof were as old as the building. True, these traditions were cherished by the elder people, rather than the younger. The pastor was expected to be conservative. The former rector, in fact, had been worried out of the church and village, because, as Spencer Howe and others of his generation put it, "the dominie catered too much to the young folks." And to-day, with the storm pelting down, Blake — the new minister — sat there, in his damp, box-like study, with a far-away look in his rather tired eyes, and wondered whether it all was worth while.

"I seem to have been called to a barren vineyard," he murmured, with dejection. "How great

a work will be necessary, here, to make it fruitful unto the Lord! ”

The discouragements, the ever-recurring objections to his way of doing things, and the small, intangible results of his labors, had already lined his face, after only his first six months in New Canaan.

Born and bred in the city, its impress was upon him, and New Canaan seemed to him as a new world — a world in which the ideals and desires of those he loved, and in whose footsteps he had so humbly tried to follow, were alien.

The senseless bickerings over nothing, the bitter prejudices and cruel narrowness of his people appalled him.

The business of the church called him forth; but whether the gloomy, foreboding day had saddened him, or whether the tension of his fiber was beginning to let down, he could not bring himself to leave the rectory.

Undecided what to do, he got up and peered out into the rain. Standing at the doorway, his smile failed him. He flung himself dejectedly into the chair by the window, once more.

Well along in years, with hair graying at the temples and with rather a thin, pensive face, he made a most pathetic figure, slouched down there. How

long he sat thus he failed to realize. But in the end a quaint sort of contentment and a new resolve shone in his eyes; and Blake, because he was as good as the doctrine he preached, knelt to pray for guidance and to thank Him who is the friend of those who seek Him.

A gleam of sunshine cut through the clouds; Blake saw that the rain had stopped. He took his coat and hat, and with sudden decision left the rectory. As he pushed his way along the water-soaked road, he smiled: "Well, perhaps every cloud *has* a silver lining, after all!"

He had not gone far when a voice called to him from the porch of one of the clean white dwellings which, straggling along the State road, gave form to the village of New Canaan.

It was Nance Pelot, busy repairing the damage the storm had done to her flowers.

A pretty figure she made, standing knee-deep among the rain-beaten blossoms. Her slim, graceful figure, her hazel eyes, coiled masses of hair and vivid mouth sharply distinguished her from all the other girls of this humdrum little village.

Blake, pushing open the gate, had hardly reached the porch, where a dripping lilac brushed his shoulder and sprinkled water drops upon his cheek, when

Nance took his hand and gave him a welcoming smile.

"Why, hello, Mr. Blake!" she cried. "What an afternoon for you to be walking around!"

"I was just making a few calls, Nance. There's a choir rehearsal this evening, and I wanted to make sure Silas Jayne would be there. We couldn't get along without him, you know, so I went to ask him."

"I do hope he'll go," said Nance. "I heard this morning he had a wretched cold."

"It's nothing serious," smiled Blake. "He wheezed for my benefit once or twice when I went in. But he forgot his ailment when I told him we'd decided to put a boy choir into the church. He was afraid we might not want him to sing any more. For the moment he seemed to be downright worried, until I assured him that we would keep our quartette, even if we did have the boys."

"Silas Jayne has a good voice, Mr. Blake. The only trouble is that occasionally he seems to lose control of its volume, and startles the rest of us with a roar that's abysmally deep, and drowns us all out. It's really quite dreadful at times, even if it does make you laugh."

The pout with which Nance Pelot said this was pleasant to see, Blake thought. She was good to

look at, was Nance. He found the bright conversation and the half irresponsible outbursts of this full-blooded, whole-hearted girl a great relief after an hour with Mrs. Clarissa Howe and others of her kind — a ray of sunshine amid the general gloom and dull monotony of New Canaan society.

Her mother's people were gentlefolk, and there was an unmistakable air of culture about the girl that set her apart from the others in the village. Her grandfather, Warner, and his grand and great-grandfathers before him, had made history in the olden days. The patrician face of Nance was a Warner face, and the warm French blood of her father's people had given color and dash to her prim New England heritage.

Nance hung up Blake's coat and hat and led the way into the sitting-room.

"Take this rocker, Mr. Blake. You look tired."

"I *am* a little tired, Nance," he returned, as he sank comfortably into the well-cushioned chair.

"But I can't stay long. I have to see Mrs. Cabot. She is a dear old lady, but so deaf she never hears my side of a controversy. She always manages to miss my very best arguments."

"There's been a controversy, then?" asked Nance, sitting on the piano bench. "Doctrine?"

Sitting there, her feet swaying back and forth unconsciously, her eyes shining, vibrant and intensely alive with magnificent youth, the girl formed a picture. Her full, red mouth had an appealing tilt to it that won you; and her hair, the color of ripened wheat, piled up seemingly anyhow, in its well-ordered disorder gave an almost exotic cast to the strong features.

The trim ankles swinging in and out of her dainty skirt, the high-arched, delicate feet, and the full rounded figure of her, made Blake wonder if New Canaan, with its petty tyrannies and gossip, was all this strong, unbridled girl was to have for her portion in life.

The thought haunted him. Surely Nance was not to grow old and wrinkled at thirty-five, worn out with the drudgery that took the happiness out of so many lives. Surely the blood of her race would cry out in her for the good things of life,—the refinements and luxuries that Nance herself had known in childhood. The memories of crowds, big cities, wealth, ease, do not fade out when once a full-grown girl has envied them.

Blake wondered, as he watched her, how this high-spirited and richly-endowed girl could tolerate the melancholy mediocrity of the country village.

He was conscious of the pause in the conversation, and felt confused as he found the girl's eyes questioning him. Hurriedly he continued:

"Doctrine? No. Not exactly — although indirectly, of course. It was about music. As you know, Mr. Lester and I have come to the conclusion that a boy choir in surplice and cassock, to reinforce the quartette, would add to the interest of the service. It would not involve any departure from the authorized ritual. It would be merely an elaboration. I hold that we should praise the Lord with the most perfect ceremony possible. We have Scriptural warrant for that. The priests of the Temple offered their sacrifices with the emblazonment and pomp they considered due to the glory of the Most High. Why shouldn't we put our singers into symbolical vestments, and give them a golden cross to carry as with triumphant hymns of praise they approach the altar?"

"But Mrs. Cabot did not agree with you?"

"Most emphatically not. Mrs. Clarissa Howe, whom I had seen before, also doubted whether it would be exactly proper. But her husband has given me his word he will not oppose the boy choir. It's the first time the senior warden has failed to accuse me of trying to turn the church into a place of

amusement, since I have been here. It broke his heart when the other vestrymen voted him down and gave the church a real organist. Some of my people think Frank Lester is an emissary from the devil, sent here for their special damnation — and when they find out that we purpose to have a surplined choir — well, it will just about clinch the matter in their minds.

“But I want to tell you, Nance” — and Blake showed his determination for the first time, this afternoon — “I’m going through with it. It’s wrong to live the way these people do. God isn’t mean or narrow. Fire and brimstone belong to a past age.

“The hell of our forefathers has been laughed out of court by all who haven’t locked the door of reason and thrown away the key. Infant damnation, predestination, eternal punishment and an avenging Deity have had to go. Intolerance belongs to an age of ignorance. It’s unchristian, and I am going to make them see it the right way — or leave. If you want to do business to-day in religion you’ve got to make it attractive, and I’m willing to save souls if I have to go out and advertise to do it. This is just between you and me,” he added, smiling.

It may have been the irony of fate, or pure coin-

cidence that, as if in answer to Blake's ringing words, the kitchen door came crashing in, and a dull jar, like the sound of a falling body, followed it.

Nance jumped to her feet. Her face went ashen, and fright gave way to a more terrible realization. Blake sensed the truth. Into Nance's eyes came the pitiful look that hunters see in the great eyes of a doe, trapped in the snow-crust. Blake turned his head away as she left the room. He knew it would fatally wound her if he seemed to notice, or offered her his help.

On the kitchen floor lay Joe Pelot.

The village drunkard had come home!

CHAPTER III

IDLE TONGUES AND SHARP ONES

DABNEY TODD'S blooded Holsteins were tinkling their way back to town from the pasturage, under the leadership of little Davy Quigg, before Nance had been able to get her father washed and to bed, an inert, senseless lump of sodden stupidity. When sober, Joe Pelot was harmless and good-natured, even though inefficient beyond all hope of regeneration; when drunk his besotted inertia would have made angels weep.

Nance was nearing the age of twenty-one, and oft-repeated occurrences of the kind had hardened her against the physical revulsion drunkenness brings to most women, but the hurt that would not heal was in her heart. Though her teeth gritted and the tears that came to her eyes were only tiny ones that clung to the lids, still her proud head was bowed. A great fear of happiness at times seized her. This day had been only a day similar to many that had gone before. Always this thing that

was eating her heart out found some fresh form of insult and shame, and to-day it had evidenced itself before the minister.

Dabney's Holsteins recalled fleetingly to her the fact that he and his sons were making the money that brought blooded cattle and many other forms of prosperity to them, in the same little shop that her father, and father's father, had owned. Some of the older people even to-day called it Pelot's Forge.

The forge had gone, and with it the big farm it had paid for; and to-day, dollars — dollars as precious now as acres had been years ago — had gone the same way.

Anger, too, flared in the girl's heart against one who either maliciously or unwittingly had brought forth this fresh relapse on her father's part. Old Joe Pelot was a drunkard, but he had his virtues. In his sober moments some remnants of a lost respectability answered Nance's pleadings, and he made at least a half-hearted effort to keep away from drink, despite the insolent jeers of boon companions and the entreaties of those who, like true emissaries of Satan, always seem to take delight in dragging back into the mire all who strive to pull themselves therefrom.

New Canaan was too small, and everybody's business was too certainly some one else's business, to give Nance courage enough to try concealing all of her father's weaknesses. So it was generally known that she had brought him back from Redburn and had opened the little home in New Canaan largely because she had believed she could reform him — and, like most of us who profess to believe in the creed of that Man who died that we might all be saved, her neighbors and passing acquaintances never let her forget her task. Nance, because there was a great deal of the thoroughbred in her, never shrank from it.

Fierce resolve glittered in her eyes, and her small hands clenched vengefully, as she exclaimed:

"I'll find out who teamed into Redburn to-day. There weren't many. I didn't see anybody pass this house. But I'll ask Chet. He'll know."

She had her supper alone, as the sun, sinking in a ball of fire, shot its golden rays into the little sitting-room. The windows were open, and the chattering of birds busy about their preparations for the night floated in to her. The little town itself was contentedly going about its business in a genial sort of after-supper glow.

The girl felt apart from it all. The happiness

she could sense in a chance word caught here and there from passersby and near neighbors, not to mention the very maternal twitterings of a sleek mother bluebird in her front yard, seemed to have parted at her very door and flowed on, leaving her utterly alone.

The room itself caught the girl's attention, and brought a heart-throb of its own. Something from right within had gone into the making of that little home. It was to have been the foundation for her father's rehabilitation.

The town of Redburn, some few miles away, had always offered too many temptations for Joe Pelot. For this reason alone, Nance had insisted on removing to New Canaan. The home they had lived in, at Redburn, with its two tiny rooms, and with her father working for a daily wage, held nothing but bitter memories. This was to have been different. Nance had felt so surely that he would be able to have his own little business here, again. That, somehow, they would make it pay. And the little home was to have been so full of happiness, and faith, and love that they just couldn't think of failure.

The dainty white curtains Nance had made with her own fingers. The pictures were of her own

choosing — and the piano — oh! the saving and the planning to make it possible!

And now, the stern little bronze Wagner glaring down at her from its place above the piano, seemed to ask if this was to be the end. Was hope to be snatched away from her now in the full glow of her youth? Why did fate seem to pursue and torture her, who only wanted to be like other girls?

There was none to answer, and her throbbing heart beat against the walls of its prison.

Minutes lagged by, until the sound of the gate swinging open, and the quick step of some one coming up the gravel walk sent a flush to her face. The hearty ring of a boyish "Hello, Nance!" found her big, tear-filled eyes smiling a little.

The visitor felt enough at home to come in without waiting for further invitation. It was Chet Todd, in his "Sunday best," and not anywhere nearly as comfortable as he had been while painting Link Watkins' ceiling.

Chet, despite the rough-hewn exterior that hid his sterling qualities, made a fine figure of a man. Frank blue eyes that looked at you with honest directness, capable shoulders and strong hands, a well-raised chin and somewhat curling brown hair

WHY DID FATE SEEM TO PURSUE AND TORTURE HER, WHO
ONLY WANTED TO BE LIKE OTHER GIRLS?

distinguished him far above the average run of country youth. Now there was an eager youthfulness to him as he stood gazing at Nance, and the big, honest smile that made him "Chet" to every one was back again in its accustomed place.

"Say, Nance!" he cried. "You want to hurry up. We're late now. I been down doin' a job of paintin' for Link Watkins this afternoon, an' had to give dad a lift afterward at the shop, an' I want to tell you I ain't been sittin' down none since I got home. Took me 'bout as long to get the paint off myself as it did to get it on Link's ceiling."

Chet stopped, out of breath. Nance felt cheered in spite of herself. There was something contagious about Chet's enthusiasm, even though his speech was rough at times, and strictly to the point.

Nance, who had greeted Chet with all the courage at her command, put on her hat and began sorting over, in a half-hearted way, the music they were practicing for the following Sunday.

As Chet followed her with his eyes, he suddenly became conscious of her strained manner, and his hands clenched unknowingly. Some one had told her about Martin Doover.

He crossed the room to Nance's side, caught the

hand that held the music, and swung her around until she faced him. One look at her confirmed his suspicions.

“ Say, Nance! ” he cried, his face convulsed with anger, “ they ain’t no one said nothin’ to you, has they? They ain’t no one tried to shame you? ”

The suddenness of it surprised her, so that the music went tumbling to the floor.

Seconds passed before Nance could find an answer.

“ Why, Chet Todd,” she stammered. “ Have you lost your mind? There’s a mad look in your eye.”

“ No, I ain’t lost my mind,” he returned. “ I ain’t lost my mind, an’ I ain’t half as mad as I might be. But I know something’s happened to you. You don’t look that way when they ain’t. What’s the matter? You can tell me anythin’, everythin’—you know that, don’t you? What is it? ”

Nance’s lip quivered as she answered: “ My father —”

“ Your father? ” There was relief in Chet’s voice.

“ Your father? Some one’s gone an’ got him loaded again, eh? Who was it, Nance? ”

She was nearer to real tears now than she had

been all afternoon. Compelled to stand alone, she was capable of it. Looking now into Chet's eyes, she saw kindness and friendship there, and her woman's intuition told her she was not quite alone. Also, womanlike, now that she felt that she had some one to lean on the least bit, she wanted to cry. The cherished human desire that is in all of us, to have some one to confide in, all but overpowered her.

Chet felt, in some vague way, her thought.

"Don't you mind, Nance," he consoled her.

"Well, I do mind," she managed to answer. "It's the first time in three weeks. He *was* trying this time, Chet. You — you've been more than kind."

"Shucks! I ain't kind. I'd do anything for you, Nance."

"I believe that," she answered, looking thoughtfully down upon the sheets of music on the floor. "There isn't anything we can do about it now. You don't know whether anybody went to Redburn to-day with a team? I mean, anybody of that kind, you know — anybody that would do such a villainous thing as — as lead my father into temptation."

"Only one person that I know of," replied Chet. "It looked as if it was goin' to be a hard rain, an' it scared 'em all except one man."

“ Who was he? ”

“ Martin Doover. I mean young Mart. He went down with a load o’ potatoes, an’ got back early in the afternoon. I seen him later at Watkins’ store, after he’d been home an’ put his team away. He told me he’d been to Redburn.”

“ Did he stop at my father’s shop? ”

“ I reckon he did. Old man Howe seen them talkin’ together before he come into the store. They were in the back of the shop, behind a wagon, an’ he ’lowed they seemed to have some confidential things to say to each other.”

It was all becoming very clear to Chet. Knowing Martin’s breed, the signs were unmistakable.

“ Was my father — himself? ”

“ He didn’t say nothin’ about that. But I know he was workin’ in the shop right after dinner. I seen him shoein’ Paul Cuddeback’s drivin’ horse before I went in to Watkins’s. So I reckon he was all right. You can bet your life on it, Nance, Martin Doover is to blame this time.”

Chet’s score with Martin weighed heavily.

Time had flown and the choir rehearsal had been quite forgotten, until the outer door to the porch burst open, and a girl of about eighteen came breezing into the hall, and thence to the sitting-room.

"Come on, you folks! We've been waiting twenty minutes now. Ready, Nance? How do you do, Chet? I reckoned I'd find you here."

It was Myrtle Lewis, the contralto of the quartette, and the significant giggle which accompanied her last sentence made Chet turn scarlet at once.

"Shucks! Myrtle!" he stammered. "I ain't no more likely to be here than some place else. I jest came in to try over my duet with Nance."

"I didn't hear any singing as I came on the porch," remarked Myrtle. "You must have been doing it pianissimo. Ah! Here's Nance, at last!"

Together they all walked down to the church. Nance, now quite herself again, gave no hint or sign of the grief corroding her heart. Chet, through all his sorrow for her, could not help sensing keen admiration of her fortitude.

After the rehearsal Chet and Nance walked home together, and the young spring moon, peeping over the treetops sometime later, found them still at Nance's gate. Youth takes a long time to say good-night, and whatever it was that they said to each other matters not. But Nance, as she closed her eyes that night, found the little star of hope, which turns the grayest of days into bright ones, still shining.

CHAPTER IV

NEEVEY TODD

CHET had been in such a hurry to dress, and to see Nance, that he had got away from the supper table before his father had come home.

When Dabney Todd did get in to supper, he was confronted with a blaze of variegated color at the other side of the table that made him blink. It was a new silk waist worn by the lady who had been the sharer of his joys and sorrows for nearly thirty-five years, Minerva Middleton Todd. Plump and good-humored was Minerva, with cheeks ruddy as apples, kindly blue eyes — eyes like Chet's — behind sparkling, gold-bowed glasses, and a smile so cheery that it could melt to softness even the most vinegar-faced deacon of the village church.

“Sufferin’ snakes!” ejaculated Dabney, eyeing his spouse. “Where did ye git that hoss-scarer, Neevey?”

"What's the matter with it?" she demanded, coldly.

"Ain't nothin' th' matter with it s'fur's I know — 'cept it looks like it might catch fire if anybody was to shake hands with you a little hard. It's surely a hot pattern." Then, with an air of conviction: "Don't take no fortune-teller to know where it come from."

"Where?"

"That there Cash Bailey come through town to-day. Stopped to have his horse shod. I seen that thunder-an'-lightnin' cross-bar stuff you're wearin', on his wagon. I might have knowed he'd have you totin' some of it around afore sundown."

"Dabney Todd!"

It was a command.

Dabney knew he had gone far enough. So he hastened to add, with strained enthusiasm:

"It's real purty at that, Neevey. I'm plumb glad you got it. Scotch, ain't it?"

Neevey's red face broke into such a gratified smile, that her husband was glad he had admired it.

"Yes," she answered. "It's the tartan of — of some clan. I don't mind jest which one. Rob Roy, or Cameron, or Lindsay, or suthin'. Anyhow, it was the purtiest in the wagon, an' I picked it out for

myself. That there Cash Bailey is a right smart young feller. I've heard tell of him afore. He's a nephew of John Bailey, who keeps store over to Twelve Corners. Cash said these colors give tone to my complexion. It's the stylistest thing on Fifth Avenue, N'York."

"They's certainly style about it," murmured Dabney. "It ain't like nothin' I ever seen afore."

"Little you know about style," said Minerva. "What's your idee of it, anyhow, Dabby?"

"Oh," answered her husband, pensively, "I reckon somethin' cut on the bias, with embroidered circingle, tatted holdbacks an' crocheted tugs, also a velvet basque ruther high on the crupper, would be about it. Then put in a bolero, with scalloped slashin's piped with plain red an' yaller insertion, an'—"

"There, there, that'll do!" interrupted Minerva, reddening. "You can't make sport o' *me*, Dabby Todd! I can git along all right, I cal'late, without none o' your suggestions. By the way, Cash told me he'd be here ev'ry two weeks for a spell. I'm goin' to buy a pair of pants for you next time he comes."

"Oh, you air?" was the startled response. "What color be they?"

“Blue — robin’s egg blue — with a black stripe down ’em. ’Course you’ll on’y wear ’em to church an’ sociables — an’ maybe when you have an auction.”

Minerva Middleton Todd, despite her decided manner, always had a predominance of good temper shining in her broad, healthy-hued face to counteract any sternness of manner which might seem to leaven her disposition. In the gorgeous plaid silk waist she was flamboyant, but not unattractive.

“ ’Pears to me, Neevey, you git younger the older you are. Now you have that blue an’ red an’ yaller on, an’ your hair all primped up in them wavy wrinkles on your forehead, you’re as likely-lookin’ as any young gal in this village. If I didn’t know you was ’most as old as me, I’d say you was ’bout twenty-five.”

“G’long, Dabby! I’m an old woman, with two big grown men for sons, an’ a granddaughter. I’ll be fifty-four come nex’ fall, an’ I ain’t aimin’ to hide my age, nuther. ’Tain’t *that* as is botherin’ me jest now.”

“Is anythin’ botherin’ ye?” inquired Dabney, as he accepted a hot corn muffin, and proceeded to flavor it to his taste with butter and molasses. “I notice ye been thinkin’ ’bout somethin’ ’sides yer new waist

all through supper, an' that ain't nat'ral, 'less they's somethin' on your mind."

"It's about Chet," she confessed.

"What about Chet? Ain't nothin' wrong with him's I see. He works every day — either in th' shop or outside. He painted Link Watkins's store to-day, and worked in the shop afterward. He don't gad aroun' none, an' sence he's been singin' in the choir he ain't runnin' off to Redburn. Ain't got no time to. The choir practices nigh every night."

"Yes, an' that's jest it. When he practices he's singin' with Nance Pelot — always Nance, never nobody else, Dabby; an' afterwards he always takes her home."

"What if he does? At his time o' life, when all the young fellers like to be doin' the seein'-Nellie-home racket, I don't blame him none. If you'll cast your mem'ry back about thirty-five years, or some sech matter —"

"That ain't the p'int at all, Dabby," Minerva interrupted decidedly. "We're talkin' about Chet, now. As I was sayin', he always takes Nance to choir-rehearsals, an' afterwards —"

"Of *course* he sees her home, an' Nance is the finest-lookin' gal in town, at that."

Dabney Todd said this in the defiant tone of one who expects argument, but is prepared to uphold his own opinions.

“I warn’t never much on singin’, Neevey,” he laughed. “But, gosh all hemlock! I slicked up to you without singin’. Every time I look at Chet an’ that big giant of an Amos, an’ think o’ the good times an’ troubles we been through together,—well, I ain’t never felt sorry about it, an’ I never had to thank that whiskered-up old he-bobcat of a father of yours for it, nuther. I always said if ever I had any young ones, I wouldn’t make life the hell on earth for ’em that your old man made for me.”

When Neevey was particularly moved she always had to cry. Dabney knew the signs now approaching, and hastened to put up the floodgates. Getting up from the table, he came round to his wife.

“Now, now, Neevey,” he coaxed, “I didn’t mean nothin’—”

“Go ’way!” she repulsed him. “Don’t you dare!”

His only answer was to take her in his arms and give her a resounding smack and a good hug which very strongly resembled that of a grizzly. Then he set off to the shop where, in his little glassed-in

office, he spent his evenings, toiling over his books, a corncob pipe for company and a comfortable bank-balance to cheer him.

When Neevey Todd had washed her supper dishes, she put on her new spring hat — the hat with the violets and red roses — draped a knitted white wool shawl across her ample shoulders, and went over to the church.

Myrtle had already reached it, with Nance and Chet, but there was no sound of singing as Neevey stopped at the church door. She hesitated a moment, then, pushing it open, went in and marched straight up the center aisle to the railing which separated the chancel and choir gallery from the pews for the congregation.

Until the advent of the new rector the choir had been a haphazard affair, with anybody crowding into the seats who thought he or she could sing, and often without any idea of doing so. It had been an excellent place for unobserved flirtation. Blake had changed all that. He had won his fight for a regular, paid organist; and, with a lot of urging, had persuaded Frank Lester to come over from Redburn to take the position. Lester soon after had induced his friend, Carl Meyer, to play his violin in the church occasionally.

The people of New Canaan required to be "jolted," to arouse their interest in anything. The violin had beyond all question accomplished that result. As Clarissa Howe said, it sent them out of church "with their teeth chatterin'."

The choir now had become an accepted part of the church, and Blake and Lester had whipped it into a hard-working organization. Still Neevey, pausing at the doorway, had her misgivings. Her antipathy to Nance took root in several ways.

Chet was her baby, and Neevey had very definite ideas concerning the girl who should take her place in his life. Not *quite* her place. No mother ever can admit two things — first, that any woman in the world is good enough to marry her boy; and second, that that woman, once a member of the family, can supplant her. Complete abdication in favor of a wife lies quite outside the imagination of motherhood.

Though she hardly admitted it even to herself, the idea of Chet's marriage, at all, filled her with a vague, inchoate dread. It seemed only one more cross to be borne. Truly, as Dabney had said, sorrows, troubles and cares had not passed them by. Privations had not spared them. The law she had laid down for herself was not less stern or more un-

compromising than the creed she expected others to live by. Precious little she had not sacrificed that her boys might get ahead — that Chet and Amos might be well taken care of when Dabney and she passed on. The little luxuries and vanities that the young women of her time indulged in she had, with Spartan-like determination, turned from.

The need of privation had passed, as evidenced by the new waist. But even the waist would be laid away and treasured for special occasions. The truth was that Neevey had denied herself so long, that her indulgences now netted her but little happiness.

Hers was a stern code; life to her was a serious business. The eager, bubbling youth of Nance, her freedom of convention, her communing with the birds and the wild things of the woods, her city ways and her different sort of clothes, were to Neevey, sacrilegious, wanton and not likely to be the means to any good end. Asked to state definitely a single objection to the girl, Neevey would have been at a loss to do more than exhibit her aversion and dislike.

Her attitude was, in reality, only the unconscious and unadmitted jealousy of age for youth, the suspicion of the passing generation for that which comes

— the same spirit that Ibsen so trenchantly portrays in "The Master Builder."

An honest soul, without spitefulness in her heart, she was never consciously unkind. For no small consideration would she have given Nance a needless hurt. Though Neevey had never realized it, what had turned her against the girl had been her overpowering fear that these signs of wildness and prodigality would surely reap their harvest. And the mothersense, within, determined her to keep Chet, her boy, away from its entangling.

Chet's mother had held herself above the petty gossip of her neighbors. Nevertheless, she knew that Nance had evidenced a sort of friendship for Larry Shayne, a ne'er-do-well who had been mixed up in an affair with a girl over at Twelve Corners; and that she had been seen riding with him and one of his Redburn cronies. Larry Shayne, sleek, self-willed idler that he was, typified all that Neevey disliked most, and even this slight friendship had served to confirm her prejudices regarding Nance.

In a way, Neevey was justified for some suspicions of Nance, if — as it seemed — the girl tolerated any advances from Larry. For this worthless son of a vicious father was, by all accounts, one of the most designing rogues who ever played on the credulities

and weaknesses of women, or spent in idle wantonness the earnings of his father's evil business.

Professor Meyer happened to be tuning his instrument, taking no heed of the members of the choir and others who were in the gallery, as Neevey entered and walked to the chancel.

"Mercy on me!" she ejaculated, below her breath. "That fiddle is squeakin' like a rusty gate! Why don't the man play, if he's goin' to? An' all them folks walkin' about in front of the organ, talkin'. It's like the County Fair, more'n a church!"

Frank Lester, at the keyboard, was sorting his music. He saw, through the aid of the mirror before him, that a strikingly-attired lady had come up to the chancel rail, and turned around to bow politely.

"Good evening, Mrs. Todd. Won't you take a seat?"

"Thank you. If I ain't intrudin'."

"Not at all. We are pleased to have the members of the congregation show an interest in our work."

"Humph! I see some of the choir takes a pow'ful lot of int'rest in each other," she replied. "I don't know what's got into that boy of mine, but

he's gurglin' somethin' all day long fit to shame a meadow lark. Seemed to me 'twas 'bout time I found out what was bewitchin' the big calf. Guess I ain't goin' to have to look much further," she added to herself, peering at Chet, who was bending over Nance Pelot as she sat on one of the seats, her eyes cast down upon her music.

Chet's back was to the body of the church, and neither he nor Nance was aware of the presence of his mother.

"Now!" cried Lester, commandingly, as he laid his hands upon the keyboard. "Let us have that anthem! Are you all ready?"

The members of the choir stood up. There came a little buzzing of conversation, among the youths and maidens, with here or there an unsanctified titter. The organist rapped sharply for silence.

"Order!" cried he.

Nance arose to her feet. She and Chet, side by side, saw Mrs. Todd at the same moment.

Chet nodded to his mother, while Nance's face took on a deeper pink, as she ventured to smile at the good lady. Neevey did not respond to either. Arms folded, she sat stiffly in the front pew, and, with a critical expression, prepared to listen to the singing — and to watch Chet.

"Benny!" called out the organist. "Where are you?" Then, louder: "Benny Zepp!"

"I'm comin'!" piped a voice from the back of the church. "What d'yer want?"

A boy about eleven years of age, with a turned-up nose, red hair, and as Neevey expressed it, half-audibly, "with more devilment in him than most boys of twice his age ought to have," came shuffling up the aisle. He stood near Neevey and looked up at Lester.

"Oh, there you are!" exclaimed Lester. "Get around to the back of that organ, will you? You're holding up the rehearsal."

"All right!" the boy answered. Then, after taking a step forward, he stopped, as if something had occurred to him.

"Mr. Lester!"

"Well?" returned the organist, with impatience. "What is it?" He swung around on his bench, toward the boy.

"I've been readin' the paper that Mr. Blake has printed an' put in the pews every Sunday," and he held up a leaflet Blake distributed each Sabbath, containing the choir program and a synopsis of his sermon.

"What about it?" queried Lester, truculently.

"Oh, hold yer hosses!" exclaimed Benny, in so low a tone as to be heard only by Neevey Todd. "You're li'ble to ditch yerself if you r'ar up so rid'c'lous."

"What did you say?" ejaculated the organist, who knew Benny had made some remark, although he could not hear it. "Speak up!"

"I said I wanted my name down as assistant organist. Everybody that does anythin' reg'lar here has some tittle or other, an' I ain't got none. I don't think that's fair, an' I ain't goin' to stand fer it, no-how!"

A cackle of laughter broke from Professor Meyer, which was echoed by a loud guffaw from Pop Jayne. Lester was quite serious, however, as he turned upon the boy.

"You go and pump that organ!" he ordered. "That's all you have to do."

"All? Ain't it enough?" grumbled Benny, as he walked around the rail to the chancel, and so toward the organ. "I claim that I'm assistant organist, an' they ain't no reason why I shouldn't be in the church paper, same as you an' Professor Meyer."

"You talk as if you played the organ," snorted Lester. "Wait till you know how to do that, so that you can help me sometimes, and you shall have

your name printed — in large type. Now get to your work. We want to begin."

"Then I ain't the assistant organist?" persisted Benny.

"Don't talk nonsense!"

Benny went behind the organ, but not to work, and Neevey caught his mischievous little face staring out at her. It was quite obvious that the young rascal, tired of being constantly reminded of his menial inferiority and jealous of the organist's commanding position, had declared a general strike in the pumping department.

"Now, professor, we'll begin. The prelude!" announced Lester. "Start with me!"

He placed his hands on the keyboard again, and pressed several keys for a resounding chord. But not a sound came from the organ. Professor Meyer's violin squeaked out thinly, alone.

"What the —" began Lester, violently. "Begin again, professor!"

The second attempt was no better than the first. Lester jumped from the bench and ran to the side of the organ. Before he got there, Benny Zepp was out in the open, ready to dodge the enemy.

"What do you mean by this, you — you young rebel?" roared Lester.

Benny permitted a slow smile to widen his mouth and push up his short nose a little higher than usual, as he piped:

“Am I the assistant organist?”

“Assistant nothing, you scoundrel!” spluttered Lester, while the members of the choir tittered.

“You can’t play the organ without me,” persisted Benny. “If I ain’t there to pump the wind, how much music can you git?”

“You’ll get more music than you want if you don’t go and do your work,” retorted Lester. “You’re paid for pumping the organ, aren’t you?”

“Ten cents a week!” squeaked Benny. “’Tain’t ’nough. I want more money, or my name printed, same’s yours. You talk about your ’tistic temper. Well, I’ve got some o’ that, too. I reckon if a growed-up man can have a big temper, a kid can have a little one, can’t he? That’s fair, ain’t it, I’d like to know? An’ I want twenty-five cents, or you can git somebody else at the bellowses.”

Lester regarded the little tyrant for a few moments. He remembered that he had been talking about “artistic temperament,” the Sunday before. Here was its first fruit! He knew Benny had listened and been impressed.

“I knew I’d fetch him,” smiled Benny, pumping

like a fire-engine, a bright new quarter lying in his pocket. "He has me here three an' four nights a week, playin' the air out of her quicker'n I can pump her in, an' I'm goin' to have a quarter, or bust up the choir!"

Something of a crowd had dropped in before the rehearsal was over. No one was more surprised than Neevey when Blake, singling her out from Mrs. Howe and a half-dozen other estimable ladies, offered her his arm, and quite gallantly started home with her. There were others at the door who had anticipated that compliment; wherefore Neevey, flattered into forgetting all her worries, took some pains to bid each of them individually a knowing good night. Such is woman!

Blake, able strategist that he was, could see trouble a long way off; but, even for him, his capture of Neevey to-night savored of real art.

CHAPTER V

THE WOLF'S BREED

SQUINT-EYED, heavy-jawed, smiling Barney Shayne had a reputation for giving people just what they wanted, and for not asking questions. Particularly the latter. People that did business with Barney Shayne had, for the most part, a particular aversion to questions. They well realized that the prying activities of busybodies in a small community never observed union hours, but might at any time of day or night circulate ugly truths about them. Barney's great and growing success depended largely upon his tact in never answering questions — or asking them.

It was a far cry from the mean little groggery in which Barney had made his humble start to the gilded Seneca Inn, where he held forth this Saturday night. His squinty smile had followed him through his varied career, and had paid him well. But if one looked closely, you could see that the smile began and ended in the eyes. It got no nearer its owner's

heart. Prosperity had cloaked the hamlike fists and bull neck with a seeming harmlessness. But those who knew could tell you differently. Barney Shayne was a man with the brakes on.

There had been a time years back, before his heart had become a chunk of ice, when a smiling-faced little woman, Larry's mother, had found a great deal to love and admire in the head of the house of Shayne. To-day, on rare occasions, when mellow with drink, Barney Shayne allowed his soul to commune with itself, and surely and truly it lined straight back to the little home of other days — Larry's mother waiting at the gate and Barney himself coming up the road, his dinner-pail on his arm and the grime of the mills on his hands.

But what was the use?

The little corner saloon had given way to a finer one. This to another larger still — and then politics. . . . Here was a man's game! And because he had been so successfully grafted upon, without questioning the why of it, he found it easy to graft on others, adding thereto an artistic touch of his own. If any little job of particular neatness and dispatch had to be done in the matter of buying or selling a franchise, Barney had his finger in the public pie. No election could be put through success-

fully without his invaluable and skillful aid. No town official sat safe in office without the security of some prop or other, leaning on Barney's friendship and patronage. In fine, the community was his oyster, to be opened by him as he saw fit.

There were those of his henchmen who said he could have anything he wanted in Redburn; and though the ways were devious, the end, with its certain results, found them speakers of true words.

To-night there was a line three deep in the bar-room. An odor of stale beer-slops and perspiring bodies filled the place. From the café the thump-thump-thump of a piano and the wheezy syncopation of a fiddle, pierced now and then by the shrill, nervous laughter of young girls — and older ones. And, keeping time with it all, sounded the steady drag-drag of slurring feet gliding over the polished floor.

The cash registers were singing a merry little tune. Barney, with his profoundly Oriental oiliness, was grinning like a fat Chinese Buddha. Out in the lobby of the hotel the incandescents burned in a haze of blue smoke. And there, leaning against the cigar-stand, was Larry Shayne, cultivating two strangers. By the look of it, he was in a fair way to succeed in gaining their friendship. But, had he been gifted with second sight, he would have seen that the busi-

ness under hand might well have called for the assistance of that older and abler strategist, Shayne senior.

Larry's unsteady eyes wandered from the one to the other, as he milled over the conversation in his mind. It was so absurdly simple, this idea of theirs, that he should buy for them a little, straggling, rock-strewn farm, which had lain idle for years, the buildings on it falling apart, desolate, grim and deserted.

And, too, their idea of giving Redburn a country club and a golf course particularly appealed to him. Lucky for old Joe Pelot that some one wanted it for something! Even an insane man wouldn't have tried to farm it. Maybe it *would* make a country club, the boy opined to himself, lying there as it did, along the lake. But wait until the wind should blow from the south, and the brackish swamp that followed the southern boundary of the farm should send its bitter, acrid smell rolling up to their clubhouse. Well, he should worry!

Naturally, old Joe would demand a fabulous price for it, if he should come to know what it was wanted for. The only way to go about the business would be to approach the old man in some casual manner calculated not to awaken the cupidity of a man who

saw, in every dollar, ten drinks of whiskey. Old Joe, handled right, ought certainly to prove an easy man to deal with.

For parties doing business through a third one, the strangers were surprisingly well furnished with the facts in the case. True enough, the farm belonged to Joe's daughter, and, certainly, she was not of age. That was common talk; but Larry should have been sharp enough to question the source of their information.

Barney Shayne was as he was because it had paid; his son because it was to his liking. And therein lay a vast difference. The natural instinct of self-preservation would have made the father cunning and wary. He would not have lost the tricks his son cast away.

"Why, there ain't a chance!" he confided to them. "Not one in a million that Old Joe will ever suspect I ain't after it for myself. I know that old rum-hound better than I know myself, and if I can't do business with him at the right price, no one in this town can."

"Well, what about the girl?" insisted the older of the two. "She's said to be a smart one. We may be able to handle the old man, all right, only to have her trip us, in the end. And what a pity that

would be, when Redburn needs a country club so badly, with all the improvement and uplift that it implies? ”

He winked sagely and took another drink. Larry winked back at him and followed his example. Right well Larry knew that men of this peculiarly smooth type, with protuberant “ bay-windows ” and with flabby little bags under their eyes, don’t build country clubs and play golf.

Said Larry, wiping his loose mouth:

“ Leave the girl to me. I’ll arrange that. If you ask me, the only hitch’ll be that you’re offering him too much.”

A spark of the father’s caution and shrewdness guided him now.

“ It’s all right giving him a big price to close it up quick — if it ain’t so big it’ll make him suspicious. Why, that farm ain’t worth ten dollars an acre, and you offering him a hundred per to clinch it quick — well, maybe it’ll be all right.”

So quoth Larry, knowing well enough that Joe Pelot would be lucky to get even ten dollars an acre, after he was through with the deal.

Real estate and Larry were friends of short acquaintance and of questionable prosperity. Still, Larry Shayne in real estate and insurance was a lot

more inviting than Larry Shayne as nondescript lieutenant of the unsavory Seneca Inn.

There were those — and many of them too — who dared not, for very obvious reasons, openly object to Barney's son. But the line was clearly drawn against him, and no one knew it better than Larry himself. He was nobody's fool. Real estate had, however, opened some doors to the boy. He had a way with him when he tried, and a manner of a sort, that made his devil-may-care self attractive to some people. And he was handsome, too, with his wavy black hair, red cheeks and full-lipped mouth — a dangerous man to girls who could not rightly appraise him, as more than one had found to her sorrow. Unscrupulous by nature, and protected by his father's power, he drove down life's highway with a free rein. What though his chariot-wheels crushed a mere woman, now and then? Were there not plenty more?

It was after nine before his visitors made ready to leave. Then Larry put them into his big gray "six" and waited at the station with them until the ten o'clock train bore them away into the night. Later, with several of his convivial companions, he tasted of the iniquity so invitingly served up by his worthy father. It was long after one before the

beetle-like electric eyes that bathed the Seneca Inn in a phosphorescent glow began to dim. The harvest had been a bountiful one.

CHAPTER VI

DABNEY TO THE RESCUE

THE following Wednesday, Neevey Todd, standing at her open window, gazed with a feeling of self-justification at Larry's racy-looking roadster standing in front of Nance Pelot's home. To give Neevey her just due, this antipathy of hers towards Nance had lately caused her some misgiving. Had she, after all — she had more than once asked herself — been fair to Nance?

The car had been there a long while, when Dabney, coming earlier than usual for supper, joined his wife. Righteous indignation shone in Neevey's eyes.

"There you are, Dab Todd," she greeted him. "Take a look at that!" And she pointed down the street at Larry's car. "An' me plaguin' myself I had read her wrong. What you got to say to that?"

Dabney peered at the car through his glasses, then over them, and scratched his head, but found no ready answer.

"Huh? What say?" demanded his helpmate

sharply. "Was I right or was I wrong about that gal? Now tell me!"

For a moment he tried to evade the issue, but, finding himself cornered, had to meet it.

"Wa'al now, Neevey," he said at last, "don't go kickin' over the tugs. You ain't goin' to git nowhere like that. It's a steady pull straight from the cross-bar as takes the wagon up the hill. I ain't got no more use for that there feller than what *you* have. Ever since he wanted me to let him bid in that big sorril team when I was auctionin' off Mrs. Weeden's stock an' farm tools, I've knowed he warn't no good. No man is, who'd rob a widow. He'd ha' got that team for three hundred if I hadn't shet him off. As 'twas I knocked 'em down for five hundred an' fifty, an' they was dirt cheap at that."

"An' he didn't get 'em?"

"No. He bid up to four hundred an' quit. But that's all over now. The p'int I make is that a feller who'd steal eggs in a barn in the daytime is purty apt to go after the chickens at night, and break the lock of the hen-roost to do it. An' I'm tellin' you that girl might be needin' the help of a good friend right now more'n ever in her life, if what I see 'bout a week back 's got anythin' to do with the comin' o' that black sheep."

“Satan give you the power of makin’ black white when it pleases you, Dab Todd,” snorted Neevey. “But if you got anythin’ on your mind, you’d better say it quick.”

“Well, mother, if you got your opinion made up already, why, argufyin’ ain’t no use. What I was goin’ to say was that that last spell o’ rain raised hob around here, an’ I was nat’rally curious to see how that piece o’ wheat down by the lake was a-standin’ it. So I hitched up ole Diamond and druv out there, the other day.”

“Jest because you was curious?” demanded Minerva sharply.

“Uh-huh. Curiosity’s one o’ the strongest an’ strangest things in human nater, you know,” he answered, with a shrewd glance at his partner. It killed the cat, remember, which means nine lives at one whack; an’ Josh Billings himself took notice of it by sayin’ it was a most pow’ful peculiar thing.”

“How so?”

“Oh, he said it was so dum peculiar that it would make a whole passel o’ folks stop to look at a hole in the ground, when they wouldn’t never even notice the stars in the sky. But no matter. It was jest curiosity that took me out to’ards that there farm, I’m tellin’ you. It was rainin’ that day, so I warn’t

lookin' to meet many folks along the way. I'd jest about got to that ole Warner place when I see a couple o' city-lookin' folks tyin' up there. Wa'al, I warn't curious none so's you could notice it; but comin' back, I'm dog-goned if I don't see them same two fellers out there in the rain, walkin' 'round that ol' farm, dippin' water out o' the holes an' hollers, an' pourin' a little bit out o' one into a bottle, an' then a bit out of another, till they darn near had enough to fill their rig.

"Now, that place ain't no good for nothin' as a farm. 'Bout all you could raise on it is ragweed an' wild carrots. The soil's poorer'n poverty in a gale o' wind. So it comes over me them fellers is plumb crazy — or is up to somethin'. The more I thought about it, the crazier it seemed. I got to figurin' they was downright idiots, or that their business was a pressin' one, to git 'em out there, wadin' around in the mud."

"An' that Shayne boy is mixed up in it?"

"He sure is. I heard that at the Courthouse in Redburn this morning, when I was makin' my returns for the last auction I had. Now, I don't think there's anythin' too dirty for this here Shayne to do. His father's record couldn't be cleaned, not even if you b'iled it in lye, an' the son's a chip o' the ole

block — no, ruther say, a piece o' punk off the same rotten ole log."

"I believe you *there!*" assented Minerva, warmly. "That's why I can't never understand why Nance, if she's what you say, can endure to train with sech a no-nation scoundrel!"

"Must be a reason, Neevey, an' not necessarily anythin' reflectin' on her, neither," Dabney asserted. "When a hoss limps it's 'cause he's lame, and when a woman does the same thing, there's somethin' been done to spoil her gait. An' if Nance has got him followin' her 'round, 'tain't *her* fault."

"Yes, but what does he want with Nance?" Neevey inquired, screwing up her eyes behind her glasses, with a quizzical expression, as she went on, meaningly: "You don't s'pose he wants to git that old farm of her mother's from her? Why, 'tain't even in her name yet."

"Wa'al, that boy's makin' an awful effort to be a real estate man," Dabney answered emphatically. Bringing his hand down on the back of his chair, he added: "By the pink-toed prophet, I'll bet he ain't losin' no time!"

"Chances are he's got old Joe on his side already, if he's been able to git to him, huh, Dabney?"

"That's the most sensible thing you said to-day.

Now he's hot-footin' it after Nance. Wa'al, he ain't got it yet. I'm one of the executors of ole Jedge Warner's will, an' 'fore anyone goes buyin' in that farm I'm goin' to do a little hesitatin'."

"When does Nance git the property?"

"Third of August, this year. She'll be twenty-one, then, an' no one can keep her out of it after that. Now, Neevey, the farm ain't much good for nothin', s'fur's I see — without there's some scheme in connection with it. So you let the girl alone, an' if she ain't right herself, Chet'll find it out, an' he'll drop her like pizen."

"I don't set no store by that kind o' talk, Dab Todd — not a bit. There's too many nice girls throwin' themselves away on wuthless fellows ev'ry day. *Some* on 'em knew what they was doin', I tell you."

Neevey wagged her head decisively. Dabney waited until she was quite through, then quietly he asked:

"Mother, do you know what's blinder'n a sleepin' mole?"

"I dunno. Lots o' things, I guess."

"Mebbe. But the blindest of 'em all is a young man when you try to make him see the freckles on his sweetheart's nose. He'll think they're sun-

shadders, an' that they make her all the purtier."

Neevey was silent for a brief moment; her bark was loud, but her bite — well, no one but herself had ever felt it.

Dabney tried to pat her hand softly, but Neevey turned on him with a start.

"That's right!" she scolded. "You always was a regular Don Ju-an. With a sentimental old goose like you for a father, it's no wonder that fool Chet's got to chasin' Link's customers out of his store 'cause they're airin' their feelin's a bit."

Feeling that he had in no wise convinced Minerva, Dabney retired from the fray like the wise man he was, and beat a retreat down to the store, which his spouse had just mentioned.

As he went, he murmured with philosophical resignation:

"There's only one thing in the world more sot in an opinion than what a woman is, an' that's — *two* women!"

CHAPTER VII

IN LIGHTER VEIN

AROUND the stove he found the usual knot of wiseacres, all consistently engaged in the arduous task of verbal gymnastics, the while they practiced their aim at the sawdust filled box beside the stove or whittled bits of box-covers with well-sharpened knives. As he entered, the subject under discussion was the President's foreign policy. Not one of them but could have given the administration cards and spades and beaten it to a frazzle in all branches of diplomacy.

"I tell *you*, sir," Spencer Howe was asserting, while he reached for a soggy cracker and another bit of cheese — for Spence, being a deacon, felt certain concessions were due him — "I tell *you*, if I'd 'a' had the handlin' o' that there matter, I'd ha' said to England, France an' Rooshy —"

"Devil of a lot you'd said!" interrupted Titus Showell, worrying off a fresh "chaw." "If you

couldn't write a furrin note no better 'n what you pay your bills —"

"That's a personal matter I refuse to have discussed here!" blurted Spence, amid general laughter. "Now —"

"Reckon mebbe he could of handled it all right, after all," put in Pop Jayne, viciously shaving a long curlecue of soft wood. "This here dy-plomacy is all a matter o' bluff, anyhow, an' the deacon's all-fired good on *that*. Bluff's what makes the world go round, anyhow — that an' love. Ain't it, Dabney?" he appealed to Todd, who had just come to anchor in a creaking rocker by the stove — a rocker strongly bound with cord and braced with wire.

"Wa'al, I dunno much about love, not at my age," drawled Dabney, "an' as fer bluff, I ain't never used none —"

A general chorus of indignant protest interrupted him, a moment. After it had subsided, he continued:

"Except where I thought it might be to the interests of all concerned. *However*, there's times when it's a mighty useful quality. As fer instance when somebody's tryin' to put it all over you, an' you can take him down a peg, to his own advantage, without no harm done. The way old Bill Hayes done, for example, out to Milton Corner."

He paused a minute, leaned back and rocked slowly, while a smile broadened his good-humored mouth. The others, scenting a story, demanded it insistently.

“Wa'al, it was this way,” Dabney presently resumed. “Bill, you know, run the only strictly third-rate hotel in the world to be advertised as sech. Yes, sir, he had the dad-blamed nerve to put it right on his sign. I swan to man if he didn't! Why, I can see it yet, jest as it was painted, though that was all o' forty year ago. It advertised that Hayes run the original and only third-rate hotel in the world, where everythin' failed to suit, where there was tough steak, useless servants, debilitated coffee an' a delapidated livery-stable. It claimed that the hotel was universally execrated, an' was run by the laziest man in the state, by an overwhelmin' majority! Satisfaction was *not* guaranteed, an' no money was refunded. Everythin' was warranted strictly shoddy!”

“G'long!” ejaculated Dory Benton, the clerk, pausing with incredulity as he weighed his hand in the scales, along with ten pounds of lard. “He never could ha' meant that — an' if he didn't, it wouldn't ha' been honest to put it out to the public!”

“Fact, though,” asserted Dabney, “an’ facts is as stubborn as mules — almost as stubborn as the run o’ womenfolks, when they git their minds sot. Yes, sir, that’s the way the sign run, an’ not a word of it true, nuther. It was the slickest tavern Bill ever run, an’ he had five. They all burned, too, heavily insured, an’ in the last fire twenty boarders was throwed out in the dead o’ winter, in their shirt-flaps. It was an A-One place, all right. But that ain’t what I’m comin’ at. I’m aimin’ to illustrate this here bluff proposition, an’ how useful it sometimes is when the other feller thinks he’s smarter ’n what you be, an’ aims to put one over on you an’ make you plumb ridic’l’us.

“It was this way. One cold January night a couple o’ tony critters come along in a sleigh an’ put up to the hotel. One of ’em was ’toxicated, an’ the other was feelin’ right up on his shoe-taps, too. They set round, a spell, tryin’ to jolly the ole man but not gettin’ nowhere much, till at last one of ’em whispers to t’other one, loud enough so Bill could hear it:

“ ‘ Say, he must be an original old Rube. Just you watch me get him on a string! ’

“ ‘ Go to it,’ says the second one. ‘ Bet you five bucks he trims you! ’

"Wa'al," continued Dabney, drawing out his pocket-knife and picking up a bit of wood, just to do in Rome as the Romans were all doing, "they closed the bet, an' the fresh one started in to do up Bill.

" 'See here, my friend,' says he, 'we're goin' to stay all night, and we want the best there is, for breakfast. I don't suppose, though, you got anything at all eatable in such a place, have you? '

" 'Oh, I dunno,' says Bill. 'I reckon as how I kin pervide 'most anythin' you kin think of.'

" 'So?' says the city feiler. 'Well, how about quail on toast? '

" 'Quail it is, ef you say so,' comes back Bill. 'Only, I tell you now, it'll mebbe cost you a trifle high.'

" 'Oh, cuss the cost!' says the sport. 'Go to it, old man — at your own figure! '

" 'Done!' says Bill, an' that settled it."

Dabney eyed his whittling with a critical eye, and kept an impressive silence, till Dory Benton, unable to contain himself, demanded:

"Well, what next? "

"Next?" queried Dabney. "Wait on, a minute; hold your hosses, an' I'll tell you. Bill, he was pow'ful worrited, 'bout that time. He felt his reper-

tation was at stake, an' he *couldn't* bear to be put down a peg by them there city fellers. When they went to bed, he set round in a great quand'y, tryin' to see his way through the mux he'd got himself into. There it was the dead o' winter, with not a nameable quail in a hundred miles that he could git holt on, an' his word pledged to deliver quail on toast in the mornin'.

"No, Bill couldn't see his way clear, nohow. He went to bed, but couldn't sleep a wink, thinkin' of the touse he was in. But after a while an idee struck him. He got up, lit the lantern an' hypered down the back-stairs, out to the hen-house. It jest happened he had a brood o' young chicks, 'bout the size o' quail an' without a bit more chaw to 'em. He gethered in two plump ones an' executed 'em an' dressed 'em right off. Then he raided the rabbit-hutch, an' pretty soon had a nice mess of rabbit-meat and the two chickens on to parbible. After that he went back to bed again, an' slept like a volunteer fireman on a winter's night when he hears the bell ring fer a fire at the far end o' the township.

"Next mornin' the city fellers come downstairs happy an' expectant, ready to git the jay landlord's whole 'tarnal flock o' goats.

"Bill was all ready fer 'em, believe *me*. Says he

to his wife — Sally Hayes, her that was a Bean: ‘Sally,’ says he, ‘you git the trimmin’s ready fer the rest o’ this here scrumptious day-joor-nay, an’ put the oatmeal on. Make everythin’ extry salubr’ous. I’ll ’tend to the meat-victuals myself.’

“While she was fixin’ some red-hot baked potatoes, sody-biscuits, bees’-honey, blueberry-pickles an’ maple-syrup, an’ b’ilin’ the tea, Bill, he took an’ br’iled them there chicks to a turn, hard-b’iled some eggs an’ toasted some riz bread, which he soused in melted butter. He cut the eggs in slices an’ laid a row of ’em round three plates. Then he put the toast in the middle an’ put the ‘quails’ on the toast. Spence Howe, if you had a feed like that, this minute, you wouldn’t be pryin’ up that fly-screen to git that sliver of cheese when you think Link Watkins, here, ain’t watchin’ you, now would you?”

When the laugh at Spence had subsided, Dabney continued:

“By the pink-toed prophet, them quails looked like what the doctor ordered, an’ no mistake. The rabbit made up for the scarcity of meat, an’ the effect was stoopendous. When the city fellers see the table, there wa’n’t two surpriseder men on earth, now I’m goin’ to tell you. They both on ’em set there, pickin’ away an’ nibblin’, plumb flabbergasted,

with Bill peekin' through a crack in the door at 'em, scared yet juberous.

"After a little silence: 'It's sure quail!' whispered one of 'em. 'I see where I win that V, Henry.'

"Win is right,' says the other. 'But how the devil —?'

" 'I don't know, nor care,' the first one answers quickly.

" 'But — but there isn't a quail to be had —!'

" 'You owe me five bucks, Henry,' says the winner, spearin' a baked potato — *pommy de terrier*, I believe old Bill used to call 'em, or somethin'. 'I don't know how he did it, but I *do* know quail, when I taste it, and that's enough for me.'

"They fell to, then, an' rended them little fowls limb from gizzard, still wonderin', but mighty tickled. When they come to settle the damage, Bill was right on the job.

" 'Let's see, let's see,' he figgered, runnin' up a colyume, 'thar's lodgin' fer two city sports, bait fer two hosses, two breakfasts with quail — most on-usual out o' season — an' extrys. That'll come to about ten dollars, seein' it's you.'

"They gulped like hornpouts, but was game an' settled; didn't count their change, nuther.

“ ‘ Get our sleigh, quick,’ was all they said. ‘ If we stick round here, we’ll maybe step on a bean, or something, an’ that’ll be another dollar.’

“ Just afore they started, they called Bill out to where they was settin’ in the sleigh, all tucked up in their buffalo.

“ ‘ Landlord,’ says one, mighty respectful, ‘ I’ve lost five bones, already, but I’ll cough up another five if you’ll answer me one question. Where in blazes did you get those quail? ’

“ Bill, he never said a word, but went back into the tavern, an’ come out in a minute with a basket. In the basket was a rabbit-skin an’ a handful of feathers — downy, leetle pin-feathers.

“ Nary a word did he utter, but just stood and muxed them feathers an’ that hide round an’ round with his hand.

“ The city sports stared a minute, plumb dodgasted. Then all at once the one that had lost the money throwed Bill a fiver, an’ give a slash with the whip.

“ ‘ Gid-dap!’ he hollered, an’ away they went, wiser but sadder — an’ poorer. Ole Bill, he stood there in the road, the happiest man in ten counties, I reckon. An’ all because why? Because he’d smote the ungodly hip an’ thigh, hadn’t let himself

be stumped, an' had met them that would of mocked him, with the efficient weapon of bluff.

"Yes, sir," Dabney terminated with emphasis, "they's times when it's not only justifiable, but even obligat'ry, an' I cal'late that there was one of 'em."

"I don't," objected Titus Showell, casting sheeps'-eyes at the cracker-barrel but not venturing a raid. "To my way o' thinkin', it wasn't nothin' but obtainin' money under false pretenses, no better than the trick Hod Littlefield an' Lester Brooks put over on George Stevens a couple of years ago, down to the Pond."

"How was that, Titus?" inquired Pop Jayne. "I don't seem to recollect rightly."

"Oh, George used to have a case o' Pabst come in by express, once in a while — mebbe twice — an' he used to keep it in his cellar. That was when the Pond was prohibition, you know. Well, Hod an' Lester used to git kind of dry, at times; an' so one night they abstracted — that's the word, I reckon — abstracted a dozen bottles, which was about one good drink fer 'em.

"George, he got wind of where his oh-be-joyful had went, an' had 'em took. Lawed 'em both, charged with larceny. Hod was awful sore, almost as sore as that time Mrs. Stone run him off her farm

an' he got ketched in the barbed-wire fence an' she warmed it to him with a barr'l-stave quite a spell till he got clear an' run home in the snow without hardly no pants on at all, to speak of. So he an' Lester put their heads together an' hatched a scheme.

"They went to George an' offered to pay up the damage, if he'd withdraw his charge. Which he done, an' they settled. Then they turned round an' had *him* took fer illegal sellin' of liquor — yes, an' got him fined, too. Can you beat that fer neighborly love an' affection?"

Silence followed, a moment, broken only by the crisp slither of Dabney's blade through the soft wood. Then said Dabney:

"If I'd put up a gag like that, I'd of felt the way Eddie Mann did that time he went bear-huntin' in Canada, an' got chased by a grizzly. Ed, he run five miles, so they say, an' finally crawled into a holler tree. The bear waited fer him to come out, all night, but Ed he decided to stay. After a while it come on to rain, an' shrunk the wood, an' Ed got stuck. The bear went home, but Ed found he couldn't. All day he shivered an' prayed fer deliverance in that there log, an' finally decided his time had come an' he'd have to go to his last reward.

"That made him think over all the mean things

he'd ever done in this life, an' one by one he prayed to be forgiven. At last, however, he remembered one thing so dod-rotted mean he didn't *dast* pray about it, an' that was —"

"Well, what?" demanded Dory Benton, eagerly. Benton, the local Republican politician and member of the county committee, might always be depended on to butt in with an interrupting question at the climax of a story.

"Wa'al," drawled Dabney, arising from his seat by the stove and shutting up his knife, "what he thought of was how he'd voted the Republican ticket all his life. When he considered *that*, he begun to feel terrible pindlin' an' small. He shrunk an' shrunk so, that, by the pink-toed prophet! he pretty soon crawled out a knot-hole in the tree an' went home — an' that's where I'm goin', too. Good-night!"

CHAPTER VIII

LARRY SHAYNE LEADS TRUMPS

JOE PELOT had lain sick for many days. More than two weeks had passed since he had fallen helplessly on the kitchen floor, and still he was only able to putter around the house a bit. Whiskey and Joe were near the parting of the ways. He had piled the straws upon the camel's back until the poor camel could rise no longer, and even its efforts were numbered.

Nance had eked out an existence after a fashion, but she was getting to her wits' end. Meager and irregular as had been the money old Joe had earned, still it had sufficed. Never before had there been a period of two lean weeks intervening.

Doc Rand had told her to-day that it would be a long time before her father would be able to work. Nance had pleaded with him, but the kindly faced old practitioner had not been able to alter his verdict. Only too well he understood the seriousness of her father's condition. In his heart he knew the old man had, by long years of intemperance, passed even

the wide limits of tolerance that the human body develops under abuse.

The girl knew the time had come for her to go out and earn the daily bread, but where to go or what to do left her without an answer.

Nance had guarded, with a great deal of fear, knowledge of the fact that she had sung in a mean little moving-picture theater back in Redburn. Several Saturdays, since she had been in New Canaan, she had journeyed to the town to earn a few scanty dollars, which had gone for the keeping of both of them. And once, when Blake had invited the choir to a little May party, she had begged a ride over to the city, and had accepted Larry Shayne's offer to bring her home in his car. That time the money, stretched and pieced out almost to the breaking point, had gone, in part, for an inexpensive but smart little dress.

For one who claimed to own his theater, Morris Rosenblatt, a beefy-faced and thick-neck shyster Jew lawyer, spent a good deal of time at the Seneca Inn, and there made many detailed reports regarding the profits of said theater to Barney himself. So it was only fair to conjecture that the unspeakable Rosenblatt didn't own nearly as much as he seemed to.

This Rosenblatt creature was of the dregs of Jewry — one of those base creatures who disgrace the name of Judah by pretending not to be a Hebrew, by trying to associate only with Gentiles and by having none of the virtues of either, with all the vices of both. Greedy, crooked and dishonest, he had already been refused admission to the bar, in Boston, on grounds of bad moral character, and had only got himself admitted to practice in New York State by false declarations. His specialty was defending low characters, dope-fiends and wrecks, fleecing them out of their last remaining funds and, in general, double-crossing everybody.

Rosenblatt was, in his way, as great an ulcer on the body politic as Shayne senior was in his. Ever since he had tried to defend some crooked claim of a morphine-addict and had demanded fifty dollars a day and expenses, from the court — only to be excluded from the case by a disgusted judge — he had been something of a joke, in town, and had borne the nickname of “Shark” and “Jewfish.” Of late he had become a henchman and a satellite of the elder Shayne, under the guise of operating a movie house for which Shayne was really putting up the money. Both Larry and his vicious son enjoyed their contact with the business, giving them,

as it did, some entrée to the fringes of the theatrical business, and bringing a certain amount of business to the Seneca Inn.

The connection had been particularly agreeable to Larry Shayne, since it had given him a chance to cultivate an acquaintance with Nance Pelot. In dealing with women, Larry had a system of his own, and, having found it so uniformly successful, had not questioned its effect and progress with Nance. He had made the mistake of thinking: "Like father, like daughter." Therein Larry had erred. His acquaintance with old Joe dated back to late boyhood. Joe had often, in happier times, merited the squint-eyed Shayne smile. In fact, Larry had — so to speak — grown up with Joe's intoxication.

Perhaps his mistake had been a natural one.

The great wonder that Larry's *savoir faire* had brought home to Nance had been that so many had been taken in by it. To her it had seemed so shabby, so make-believe, that she couldn't feel more than a passing pity for her less fortunate sisters who paid the price. Nance's tuition in that phase of life had been slight, but a few days in such a place had been illuminating.

Again, Nance knew New Canaan would not have understood. A city, or even a small town, might

not have questioned; but in this little country village, beyond peradventure of a doubt, her employment, in a moving picture theater and dance hall, would have been misconstrued into something bordering on downright immorality.

Nance little knew that some folks, Martin Doover, for instance, had already placed that construction on her — to them mysterious — visits to Redburn. And she held the respect and good-will of New Canaan more precious than she could well express. Blake's kindness, the choir attachments and many other little associations now went a great way toward making up for the things she had missed. She had been happier here than ever before in all her life. Only here had she found any measure of that sympathy, friendship and good-will which mean so much in a young woman's existence. And here, too — though this she scarcely realized and would not, had she realized it, have admitted it to herself — dwelt Chet Todd.

Looking back now, the money seemed to represent so much of sacrifice; but she wondered if it had been too much. She had risked pride, and happiness, the respect of others, but never herself — she knew that so infinitely well! And the money, the bright and shining money that every one took and

no one questioned, had meant food and clothes and shelter; had meant life!

Thus to-day, Nance knew she was prepared to make the fight again.

Had Morris Rosenblatt and the tin-panny piano of his movie-house still been available, she knew she could have turned to them with even a bitter gladness; to them, a seeming oasis in a world of uncertainty.

She smiled faintly at the irony of her decision. It was not a thing of choice. What else was there to do?

Her father's little shop, with its worn-out, cast-off tools, was of no value. Besides, it held for both of them no more than the bare chance of self-support, and for him only the semblance of employment. Beyond that, what was there? A farm! A miserable, rock-strewn farm, all but valueless. Such were their assets.

The first great tragedy of her life had found her a young girl, kneeling beside her dead mother, the promise still warm on her lips that she would keep the little farm for her own. It was to be hers and her children's children's. Some day it was to be valuable — her mother's one legacy to posterity. They would point to it with pride as the foundation of

their fortunes, and each generation in its turn would not be forgotten.

Poor, sweet little mother! How solemnly she had made Nance a party to this quixotic dream. The girl wondered what must have been her thought could she have seen it to-day — a haunted house, set in a sea of mud and desolation.

Nance knew too well, even in her hour of need, what her answer must have been, had some one offered her money for it. At least, she had been spared the agony of that, as well as the grief of seeing her husband, sinking lower and lower in the mire of intoxication, approach the inevitable end of evil living. Much as Nance missed her mother, she would not — even had she been able — have called her back to earth again from the long sleep of oblivion.

She had been so absorbed with her thoughts and the decision they had led her to, that she had failed to notice the car come panting up to her doorway and stop.

Walking up the path was Larry Shayne.

Nance's heart fluttered. Her feeling at this moment was not unlike that of a wild animal suddenly surprised in its lair. The mental debate whether to run away, or to stay and meet him, left her cold

in her tracks — and there he was in the doorway, coming toward her, his cap in one hand and the other held out in greeting.

“Hello, Nance!” she heard him saying. “You’re a perfect picture, standing there staring at me that way.” Then again: “Why, you don’t seem very glad to see me, little girl. What’s wrong? What’s the trouble all about, anyway?”

Nance was quite herself now. The deadly calm of her level voice showed that.

“Were you invited here, Larry Shayne?” The directness of her cold, incisive words erased the smile from his lips.

“Why, you ain’t going to take that tone with me, are you, Nance?” he protested. “Seems to me you’ve known me long enough not to be so stand-offish. Why can’t we be friends? Why can’t you — think of me as — as something besides an enemy?”

“We have been over all that before,” she answered, with a glint in her eyes. “I believed I had made myself perfectly clear. If I have left any single thing unsaid that has given you reason to think there could be anything further between you and me, I am truly sorry. Your ways are not mine, and that’s an end to it.”

"Aw! Don't say that, Nance!" he pleaded.
"Don't say anything you're going to be sorry for."

"Sorry?" The sarcasm of it! She continued, steadily: "Why, every privilege my friendship gave you, you have abused, and tried to cheapen me with. But why go over all that again? The one thing I asked was that you should stay away. Your coming here to-day was a matter of small importance to you. It was the one thing I've dreaded for weeks."

There was a sob in her voice, as she continued:

"I have been happy here — in a way. These people are my friends, and I want their respect. More and more I've realized lately what they must have thought when they saw me driving around with you, seemingly accepting your hospitality and — friendship. They knew you much better than I did, and, you know, they don't like you in this town. That car out there will set a hundred tongues to wagging. Right now, I'll venture, there isn't a soul in New Canaan but knows, and some of them are pointing to it, glad it's there to shame me."

The girl's emotion overcame her. Her eyes filling with tears, she sank into a chair, all of her reserve gone now, and her throbbing heart a-smother.

"It isn't fair!" she sobbed. "It isn't fair!"

Larry Shayne had foreseen some such reception, and he had expected anger and distrust, but hardly tears — not tears from Nance.

Watching her, he began to appreciate dimly the gulf between them, and for the first time seriously wondered if he had let her slip through his fingers.

There was a great deal about the girl he couldn't understand. To put it in his vernacular, he couldn't figure her. Still, very decidedly he meant to have her some day — when he should get around to it. Larry boasted that he always got everything he really went after. In his conceit he believed no woman could withstand him, once he had set his mind on her. And Nance should prove no exception to the rule.

Drink had made a fool of him, or he wouldn't have lost her before, thought he. What an idiot he had been to suggest that trip down the St. Lawrence to Montreal and Quebec! He smiled to himself a little as he remembered her flaming indignation. To-day he had come under no misapprehension.

But time would heal all that.

Larry was shrewd enough to wait until Nance had regained control of herself before he spoke; and had it been pure invention on his part, the tangent his

conversation took would have been worthy of the best Shayne traditions.

"Why, Nance," said he, in a gentle tone, "I didn't think I needed an invitation. The pleasure of seeing you didn't bring me here. I came on business."

Business!

Somehow it penetrated the girl's brain. What business could Larry Shayne have with her? What legitimate business did he ever have with anybody? Who had ever dealt with him, whether man or woman, without having in the end bitterly regretted it?

Larry failed to sense her attitude, but with fatuous and labored good-humor pressed his campaign.

"Yes," he rambled on. "I came here to make you an offer on your farm. I've got a pretty good little real estate business of my own now, and I have a chance to sell that farm for you. A real fancy offer, too. I thought it was your dad's until I went over to the Courthouse this morning."

Larry was lying now. He had hoped to get hold of the farm through old Joe himself. Finding her father not at his shop had knocked his plans a bit awry. Indeed, he had even hoped to time his arrival at their home so as to find Nance out, and still

see Joe alone. As he went on, the girl listened mechanically, without seeming to show any interest.

"You know, you ain't got any right to expect a big price for that place, Nance, and I figure you ought to jump at the proposition I'm going to make you. I'll bet you ain't had another offer for it in ten years. And no matter what you think of me, I want to tell you I've boosted the price all it'll stand. Now we want to close it up quick, 'fore this fellow backs out. If we do, it means twenty-five dollars an acre. Think of that! What do you say?"

Nance shook her head.

"It's idle sitting here talking about it. It's not for sale."

"Not for sale?" Larry wondered if he heard right. "You mean it ain't enough? Why, you couldn't *give* that farm to some folks I know."

Nance knew he was telling the truth, now, and vaguely wondered why he had made such an extravagant offer. A look at the place would have told any one he was offering twice what it was worth.

Was there a hint of charity in the proposal? At the thought, she shuddered. It seemed passing strange to her that this man should all at once be taking so very active an interest in her.

Strange, too, that she had foreseen herself a party to just such a conversation as this.

"No," she murmured. "No . . . it's not the price. The price is too high. But I can't sell it. You would hardly understand, I believe. But it was my mother's farm. She gave it to me, to keep for her. I guess I couldn't sell it and be happy."

Nance was calm again, and well aware of the decision she was making. Also of the fact she was throwing away the one opportunity she was likely to have of securing money enough to tide her over.

It seemed almost providential, this offer, coming in her hour of direst need.

Larry Shayne argued long and well, to no avail. One less determined than he, or with finer feelings, would have desisted long before he did.

Nance denying herself and her father, that she might be true to a promise given, strangely puzzled him. Not by the longest flight of his imagination could he picture himself standing on any such trifling principle. It was as far removed from him as the stars.

He was nearer to loving Nance Pelot at that moment — had love been possible to him — than he had ever been before. And fear of losing her gave him the courage to venture on dangerous ground.

"Well, Nance," he risked, at last, "I don't want to tell you your business, but it don't seem to me that you're doing the right thing by your dad. You've got him to think of. What are you going to do about him? Where are you going to get the money to keep things going?"

"I'm going to work," she shot back at him. "There must be something I can do. I'm strong and active, willing to labor, and determined not to be dependent on anybody. I'm positive that if I once make up my mind to work, and get over caring what kind of work it is — just so it's honest — I shall be able to get along, some way or other."

"You just try it," he warned. "There isn't a decent job in this whole place for a girl like you. What are you going to do? Go out and wash dishes and scrub floors, for a lot of ignorant nobodies, who'll never let you forget for a minute that you are what you are?"

Nance was silent.

"Can you see yourself," he went on, carried away by his own eloquence, "a worn-out, flat-chested woman at twenty-five, your hands swollen and boiled in lye until they're only things fit to work and eat with? No, you can't see that, huh? Well, you wait until some of the good people in this town come

a-running in to help you! I ain't your kind, you say? All right! I'll let that go. I won't insult you by offering you money. You don't want that from me. But I *will* get you a chance to work. My old man needs some one to hit that piano of his every Wednesday and Saturday night — some one that won't scare the customers out of the place, and it's your job if you want it. And my dad ain't no tightwad. What do you say?"

His impassioned words brought Nance out of her chair. Nervously she paced back and forth across the room. She had argued this over with herself before he had come; and as his words fell from his lips she knew her fate was being read for her. But she could not deny herself that last brief minute of hesitation which was her woman's right.

The repugnance and loathing she had for the place she put aside. The putting of herself in Larry's hands chilled her; in that last moment it was to Chet that her thoughts went out.

As she turned to face Larry Shayne, staring at her in the growing twilight, she sent a fervent little prayer heavenward that Chet Todd might not know.

"When do we go?" she asked, simply, all inflection gone from her voice.

It was an effort for him to answer. What it had cost her he almost understood, though vaguely — for, despite all his vileness, some spark of manhood still glowed deep in his mean little soul; some faint, expiring flicker of decency not yet quite drowned by the rising flood of intemperance, vice and dishonesty that had come to him from his base father as a patrimony.

“To-night! Now!” he articulated.

Nance drooped her head in sign of assent. An evil glitter leaped into Larry’s unsteady eyes. He felt that he had won the first battle of a campaign which could end only in complete victory.

As the car swung into the road, Nance huddled down in the robe he had placed around her. The seconds that elapsed before they would be passing Todd’s blacksmith shop seemed countless hours to the girl, her teeth biting into her lips until they were white. She assured and reassured herself over and over, countless hundreds of times, that she would not look up — and then, when they had almost passed, she turned. There, in the glow of his forge, stood Chet, his face dead white, staring at her.

The man beside her wondered why she sobbed so bitterly to herself.

Nance Pelot knew that she could never forget

those eyes, staring out at her from beside the fire of the forge.

Back in Dabney's shop it was very quiet. A rigidity as of death seemed to freeze Chet.

The bellows fell in with a gulp. Long after the car had dropped out of sight, and the monotonous drumming of the evenly-hitting motor had died away to an indistinct hum, he stood as cold and motionless as the anvil at which he had been working. He was alone. A stillness crept in with the gathering shadows of evening that seemed to smother the faintly smoldering fire in the forge. After a while the hands that held the hammer and tongs relaxed. The tools fell to the floor, sending up a clatter that echoed and reëchoed in the silence.

When finally Chet did move, it was to put out the glowing coals. He stood for a long time, staring dully at the dead fire. Slowly, little by little, he began to realize that he was sick — sick with a weariness that made the task of lugging his big body homeward an undertaking beyond his power to perform. His head throbbed until the big shoulders sagged with the weight of it.

Night was at hand. His father or Amos would be coming for him soon. Supper would be waiting — Neevey, his mother, watching for him. Supper

— food — it seemed so useless! Home! It was the one place he could not bear, just now — Amos' happy face — his mother's inquiring eyes. Slowly he dragged his feet to the door, shut it and dropped the crossbar into place.

He turned then, and started off across the back pasture. At the gate he stopped, and, with unseeing eyes, stared across the fields to Nance Pelot's home, a single light gleaming from her kitchen window. Standing there, in the darkness, he drew one of his big, smoke-blackened hands across his eyes. It came away wet.

"I ain't got your manners, Larry Shayne," he muttered, "and I ain't got your clothes, your auto or your money. But you can't have her. No, by God, you *shan't!*"

He swung his two big hands out in front of him.

"Not as long as I got *these*, you won't!" he cried. "You've got to fight me for her!"

CHAPTER IX

DABNEY RIDES THE GOAT

WHEN Cash Bailey chugged into New Canaan with his new motor delivery-wagon, that week, it created a sensation, and even served in a way to bring Chet back to his feet. The mechanical bent of his nature was too strong for him not to show some enthusiasm over Cash's new car. The engine was thirty-five horsepower, Cash proudly asserted to the group gathered about his machine, and it could climb hills like a fly running up a window-pane. The body had been Cash's own idea, and he had fitted up the interior to resemble a tiny store.

"It's a Gideon," he explained to Dabney Todd, as he ran the car up a narrow driveway from the state road. "Horses are too slow for me. I have to get around in a hurry now that my trade has grown so big. This car cost a thousand dollars, but it will pay for itself 'fore snow flies."

"Looks all right," observed Dabney, in slow ap-

praisal. "This is certainly the age of improvements, an' we got to keep up with 'em or git left at the post, whether it's in travel, or religion, or politics, or what-not. Nice machine, all right. Shouldn't wonder if she's a lot faster than any car in town."

"Well, rather!" was the grinning response. "I'll leave her here while I go round with some of these dress patterns I have orders for."

"It's safe to leave her, I s'pose?" asked Dabney.

"Sure! An automobile will always stay put. That's one of its advantages over a horse. It ain't everlastin'ly pullin' at the tie-rope, tryin' to break loose."

Cash walked away, his arms full of dry goods, while Dabney Todd continued to gaze at the new motor car, on either side of which was emblazoned, in large gold letters, "Cash Bailey, the Bargain Man."

"Wa'al, he *may* git his money out of it," remarked Titus Showell. "But a hoss is good enough for me. Say, Dabney, why did you let him back up in front of the engine house? You couldn't git the doors open without him movin'."

"I'm chief of the New Canaan Fire Company,

Tite," replied Dabney Todd, with dignity. "I give him permission to put his auto there."

For the rest of the day there was usually a group inspecting Cash Bailey's new machine, and the general opinion, despite some adverse criticisms — engendered, one might have guessed, by envy rather than by intelligent understanding, was that she was a "hum-dinger."

It was about dusk when Cash, having finished for the day, sat smoking and gossiping in Link Watkins' store. Cash realized the value of social popularity. He usually had a new story whenever he came into the village, and always brought the news of the outside world in a more intimate manner than it could be conveyed in even the best-edited newspaper.

Suddenly the church bell clanged; the first stroke was followed rapidly by many others.

"By hokey!" cried Tite Showell, springing to his feet, regardless of his rheumatism. "There's the fire bell!"

He dashed out of the store, followed by the others, all members of the volunteer fire department.

"Looks as if it might be Deacon Howe's house or barn," cried Link. "It's over about that way, anyhow."

Dabney Todd had lingered at his supper, and was still in his house when he heard the bell.

Neevey handed him his coat and helmet almost as soon as he was out of his chair. He put them on as he rushed to the frame structure "a little piece down the road" from his house, where was kept the old hand-pump, or "tub"—as gayly red and golden as it was inefficient—that New Canaan called its fire engine.

"There's that auto of Cash Bailey's right in front of the door!" he shouted to Chet. "Help me move it!"

Chet obeyed—or tried to. But the two could not stir the cumbersome machine. The other men, from Link Watkins', were not yet in sight.

"That gol-fired thing hadn't ought to be here!" cried Dabney, as he stepped on the running-board.

"You let Cash leave it!" answered Chet.

"More fool, I!" ejaculated Dabney. "Go on, blame me while the blamin's good!"

"Can't we move it, some way or other?"

"We will, or bust the dad-blamed thing!" exclaimed Dabney. "Know anythin' about automobiles?"

"Not much. Why?"

Dabney's only answer was to lean over into the

car and inspect the control with a thoughtful eye.

"I'll have to git into the drivin' seat afore I can do anythin'," he muttered. "Wa'al, here goes!"

He climbed in and placed his two hands on the steering wheel, as he had seen motorists do. Then, as he pulled a lever, his foot pressed the self-starter.

The powerful engine began to turn over, slowly. All at once the gas caught. Came a swift, drumming roar from the exhaust.

Rrrrrawk! ground clashing gears.

Suddenly, as Dabney clung desperately to the wheel, the car gave a tremendous jump and started straight through the village.

At the bend in the road it met Cash and the men from the store. Cash gave one frightened yell when he saw his new car zigzagging toward him, with Dabney — his hair flying wild — madly "*whoa-ing*" and "*gee-ing*."

The sight of the careening car froze most of them in their tracks. But Cash, trying to stop the flying car with his bare hands, jumped directly in front of it. Wildly waving his arms, he howled at the top of his voice:

"Throw off the switch, you old fool!"

Right there Cash came within an inch of making Dabney his executioner. As the car sped on in the

gloom, Link and Tite picked him out of the mud. The wind had been knocked out of him and he showed a bruise on one side of his face, but in spite of all their efforts, he started off after the fleeing machine, streaking it down the road like a pursuing Nemesis, in the dusk.

Suddenly two long cones of light shot out ahead of the speeding monster, and red glow began to glower behind it. In some of his frantic manipulations, Dabney had switched on the electric lights.

Chet had stared after his father, as the car plunged away. Then he turned to the terrified Neevey, to reassure her.

"Don't worry, mother," he begged. "Dad can drive anythin'. He'll be all right."

"I know he can drive anythin' that lets itself be druv, Chet," she replied, tearfully. "But an auty-mobile ain't got no more sense than a buzz-saw, an' it's jest about as dangerous. I'm goin' to hitch up the bay mare an' skive along after him."

"I'll go with you," declared Chet. "There ain't any fire. Link has found out it's just Deacon Howe's hired man burnin' some brush in his yard."

"No, you won't go with me, nuther! I ain't goin' to overload the mare. I'll hook her to the runabout, and she'll take me along as fast as that

left-handed thrashin' machine what's runnin' away with y'r father!"

Neevey and Chet ran to the barn and in a jiffy threw the harness on to the mare.

"Let me go, too!" pleaded Chet, once more.

"No, no!" she refused, clambering into the high runabout — the vehicle Dabney generally used when he had to drive to the city or to the scene of one of the farm auctions at which he officiated.

Dabney was long since out of sight. Minerva stopped at Link Watkins' store and asked which way he had gone.

"Down the north road," volunteered Spencer Howe, who, with Tite Showell, Paul Cuddeback and others, had come back to the store, after watching Cash out of sight. "He was swingin' from one side of the road to the other, an' he come nigh runnin' into Joe Pelot's blacksmith shop as he went around the corner. I was kinder s'prised to see him drivin' a car. Dinged if I ever thought he c'd do it."

"Wa'al, he'll tame the dod-rotted thing afore he's done with it," opined Tite. "Don't s'pose it's as hard as breakin' a colt, at that."

Neevey heard this much as she clucked to her mare and sped away.

"They don't know nothin' 'bout it," she muttered. "They forget that an autymobile ain't human."

Up one hill and down another sped the carriage.

"Gently, Diamond!" Neevey cautioned.

The mare swerved a little as she approached a bridge over a creek. Something was thundering toward Neevey, with nothing visible but two great flaming eyes that cast furrows of light straight into her face.

"Heaven save us! It's comin'!" shouted Neevey, in terror.

She had just time to rein to one side, when the monster with the flaming eyes roared down upon her.

Neevey never knew how she escaped being tossed into the air and smashed to smithereens. The bridge was only just wide enough for two vehicles to pass, even when driven carefully. With the big motor car sweeping down at thirty miles an hour, and a man at the wheel who never had been in an automobile before, it was only the mercy of a kind Providence that prevented disaster.

"Land sakes! *It's Dabney, goin' back!*" cried she. He must, she understood, have struck to the left into the Woodstock road, and so have come

round through "Pinhook" village into the main road to New Canaan again. How he had ever made those turns, alive, she could not imagine; but little that mattered. He *had* made them, and was still master of the machine — that was enough for Neevey.

It required a minute or so to turn the excited mare, and was a risky business. But Neevey had been used to driving all her life, and Diamond knew her voice. So she made the turn with no other damage than scraping some paint off one wheel and scratching the back of the runabout against the fence.

"Whoa, Diamond! Foller that red light goin' up the hill! Land o' love! How it does seesaw!"

A crash of racked gears! The red light stopped.

For once, Neevey threw all caution to the winds, and whipped Diamond to a gallop down the hill.

Just as she neared the bottom, the red light, which had been stationary, shot forward again, disappearing round a bend in the road.

Neevey went after it, and saw that it was rushing down toward the corner, where Pelot's blacksmith shop filled the angle.

"Which way will he turn — if he turns at all?" Neevey shrieked, in her panic talking continuously to Diamond, and alternately standing up and sitting

down in the speeding runabout. "If he takes the east, he'll slam plumb into Link Watkins's, an' if he goes west, there ain't nothin' in front but Showell's ice meadow — 'less he was to make a short turn south jest afore he gits there. Nobody can tell me Dab can do that in an autymobile. He can turn on a ten-cent piece in a buggy, but this is diff'rent — awful diff'rent!"

An incandescent light hung overhead, in the middle of the road where it forked in three different directions; one of the few public lights in the village.

A group of men, with two boys — one of whom was Benny Zepp — were huddled to one side of the thoroughfare, where the glow of the electric light shone on them. They were respectfully giving the oncoming motor car the right of way, no matter which direction it might take.

"By heck! Dab has a good grip on the lines, but I swan to man I don't believe he can git her down to a walk," observed Tite Showell. "She has a gait on her like a quarter-horse. *Look out, boys!*"

The warning was uttered in a high-pitched yell, for Dabney Todd had reached the forks and was hurtling toward the onlookers.

"He's goin' south!" shouted Spencer Howe.

"Don't you think it! He's headed west!" corrected Link Watkins. "He'll hit your fence, Tite."

"Not so's you'd notice it!" came from Showell. "By jings, he's goin' to *your* place!"

Titus Showell was right. After a second of anguishing uncertainty, during which it seemed as if the unwieldy machine would jump the wide ditch into the midst of the crowd of excited spectators, it veered abruptly east and slewed toward the store.

"Git back, Dory!" roared Link Watkins, as his assistant, Dory Benton, came doddering out of the front door. "Give him room!"

It is possible that Dory had moved faster in the course of his life than he did at this instant. But none of the men who watched him could remember the time. He dashed around the corner of the store and took a flying leap down the steep bank into the compost-heap outside Link's stable.

A roar of mingled laughter, advice and warning burst from the assembled onlookers.

The motor-car — with Dabney Todd tugging valiantly, but blindly, at the steering-wheel, and pulling at every lever in sight in the hope of stopping — was close behind Dory. Unconsciously, his foot was pressing the accelerator pedal.

"Whoa!" yelled Dabney.

But a motor car doesn't take any heed of "Whoa!" If it did, Dabney would have come to a halt long before, for he had been shouting the order ever since he had first found the machine was going its own way, regardless of his wishes.

He made a frantic grab at a lever, missed it, and threw all his strength onto the steering-wheel, giving it a mighty wrench. Next moment, Link Watkins' horse-rail, to which customers hitched while inside the store, stood on end. Then it burst into splinters.

The spectators, forgetting to laugh, ducked for cover as though a bomb had been exploded among them.

Pieces of wood, clods of earth and a shower of stones, mingled with shirts, dress goods and bolts of ribbon, fell all over Dabney, rattling on the seat by his side and against the wind-shield.

He gave himself up for lost, but still maintained his wild grip on the wheel, as the car circled in front of the store. Even if he had run into an earthquake, instinct told him that his only hope lay in the steering apparatus.

"Whee, Skinny!" shouted the boy with Benny Zepp. "Look at him spinnin'! It's better'n a three ring circus!"

"Sh'd say it is!" shouted Benny. "You never seen nothin' like *that* in one!"

"Dabby!" screamed Neevey, from her seat in the runabout, as she controlled her plunging mare. "Git away from that store, will you? Stop turnin' 'round!"

This was good advice as far as it went. But Dabney neither heard nor heeded it. He couldn't. The automobile, racheting and thumping, as it described such narrow circles in the road that it threatened every moment to turn turtle.

Neevey caught glimpses of Dabney's determined face at intervals as he faced the arc light. She saw that he was holding to the wheel with the grimness of desperation.

"He'll conquer that whirligig yet — if he ain't killed!" she muttered, through her teeth. "But I wish he'd drive straight one way or the other. Spinnin' 'roun' without gittin' nowhere is plumb foolishness."

"Whoa!" gasped Dabney, again.

He twisted the wheel in another direction. The machine, with a series of deafening reports that nobody could account for, darted toward Neevey and the others who had been viewing the performance from what they deemed a safe distance.

Down the street raged the motor car, and passing Pelot's blacksmith shop, took the west road at a smart clip.

"Look, Skinny! He's goin' to drive into his own hitch-barn!" cried the other boy, Gabe Showell, youngest son of Titus. "An' there's Chet Todd waitin' for him."

"Aw!" retorted Benny, scornfully. "Chet couldn't hold that there auto. 'Tain't like a hoss. 'Sides, he's goin' right down the road to your place."

"If he don't stop 'fore he gits there, he'll be in the ice meadow," was the response. "They's a short turn, but he won't be able to make it with that there —"

A splintering, tearing crash finished his sentence for him.

Dabney had *not* made the short turn.

Instead, he had shot straight ahead, against the heavy rail fence which separated Titus Showell's ice field from the public road.

The meadow lay low, and, when heavy rains came, was mostly under water. As cold weather approached, Tite Showell turned more water in, with the result of a pretty fair crop of ice. In the spring he generally planted corn there.

No corn had been planted yet, however, and there

was water enough in the big ten-acre field to make it look like a lake.

Crash! Splash!

Hardly had the motor torn its way through the fence than it was half hidden in water. The wheels bogged down in the mud, as the machine came to a stop.

"Mercy! He's killed!" screamed Neevey, as she galloped her mare to the fence and pulled up. "It's as dark as a cellar in that field, an' there's three foot o' water an' mud. *Dabby!*"

The last word was emitted in a frantic shriek that Gabe Showell declared to Benny Zepp could be heard up at the church.

"What's the matter?" growled Dabney's voice out of the blackness. "Don't worry, Neevey. I've halted the darned thing, anyhow. Git a lantern!"

Not one, but five, lanterns were already bobbing down the road. As they approached, two of them were seen to be in the hands of Chet and Amos Todd respectively, while Joe Pelot, Spencer Howe and Lije Conklin each carried one.

There was light enough now to see that Dabney was standing up in the machine, looking for a way to get out of the field without wading through the

water. The wind-shield was smashed to nothing.

"Good thing I didn't cut myself on that blamed glass!" remarked Dabney, as he climbed over the back of the car. "Give me a hand, Chet, so's I can jump clear."

He made a masterly leap that almost brought him ashore. Half-wading, half-dragged by Chet, he reached safety. Minerva's arms were round him, on the instant, mindless of mud and water, and her motherly, wifely love was cherishing him, so miraculously restored to her after dire peril.

While they drove home together, to have Neevey look him over for possible personal injuries, Chet, Amos and Lije, with a team of horses, drew the car out of the mud, so that Chet could determine how badly it was damaged.

By the time they had the car back into the road Cash came panting up. He shook his head despairingly, as he stood there looking at his machine, the perspiration streaming down his face on to his mud-stained clothes.

"Ain't nothin' the matter with it, Cash," ventured Chet, "'cept the wind-shield's broke. An' I can fix that if you git me the glass."

"'S'all right, Chet," Cash gasped between breaths. "Don't mind the dog-goned thing nohow. I got

her insured, and I'm the agent for the company, and the claim-adjuster, too. So I don't see how I'm going to lose by the deal, no matter how it turns out. I'm a sure winner, either way. But I ain't hankering after chasing another one o' them things half way across the county and back. If that darn fool dad of yours had been a little more accurate, I'd have collected on them accident policies o' mine — or been beatin' a harp in heaven by now."

CHAPTER X

NEEVEY LENDS A HAND

THE delicacy and reserve with which Larry Shayne now treated Nance surprised the girl. His patience, never a virtue with him, suggested strongly that he had talked things over with his father. Larry had not been in New Canaan since he had brought her home that first night.

Joe, her father, showed little surprise at her absence that evening, but there was a dumb appeal in his colorless eyes that seemed to beg forgiveness for the yoke he had placed on her.

Nance went back and forth now on the stage, staying each night in Redburn. If the villagers questioned her unduly, it was only because she kept her business a secret. Secrecy and concealment were synonymous to them, and people only concealed that which was bad. Their logic was plain.

Dabney was one of the few who refused to be-

lieve ill of the girl merely because she said nothing about her affairs.

“ I reckon it ain’t nobody’s kill-or-cure but hers,” he stoutly affirmed to the circle of country-store debaters. “ Other people’s secrets ain’t no to-do of mine, as I can see. I got business of my own — which is more than some can say that are always in everybody’s else. An’ as for secrets, let me tell you this, nobody’s so fond of ’em as them that ain’t got no idee in this world of keepin’ ’em. Most people want to git holt of secrets for the same reason a spendthrift wants money — for purposes of circulation! ”

The girl’s absence from the choir the following Sunday had sent Blake to her, and Nance had quite simply told him she was working in Redburn, and that her work precluded the possibility of her giving any time to the choir rehearsals.

Blake, be it said to his credit, was sure enough of Nance not to invite her confidence against her will, nor to ask things she left unsaid. Still, he did secure her promise to be there at least on Sundays, satisfied that she would come well enough prepared, anyhow, to do her part.

Blake now had other worries. The boy choir was not progressing as he had hoped. The vest-

ments had arrived during the week, and Lester and he had had their hands full, getting the choir into shape.

It had been necessary to call in the assistance of some one skilled with needle and thread, and Neevey had graciously volunteered. Blake, returning to the manse, found her busy with needle and pins, refitting a cassock to the slim shoulders of Gabe Showell.

Neevey had become very enthusiastic about the choir, a state of mind that Blake was happy to note.

"We certainly shall owe a great deal to you, Mrs. Todd, when the choir marches up the aisle next Sunday," said he.

Neevey smiled at him.

"This is the first time you ever had anything of the kind in New Canaan, isn't it?" he went on.

"Well, no — not exactly," she answered, slowly. "One time, three years ago, it was tried — but in a diff'rent way. We had quite a choir in the church, those days."

"Yes? What kind of a choir was it?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't believe the name of it is in the dictionary. Mr. Wilbur organized it. He was our organist then. There were a whole lot of little girls in the choir — nice, feeble little

things. But you couldn't hear one of 'em sing with a stethoscope."

Blake laughed heartily.

"Strange," he smiled, "the ideas some people have of what will help the church. And it isn't a question of their faithfulness, either."

"No," agreed Neevey. "I know folks who has allers been that way, as Christian as you could make 'em, but rather loose in the head when it come to doin' things for the church."

"For instance?" Blake lured her on.

"Well, I remember one Thanksgivin', back 'bout ten years ago, there was a skittish old maid, by the name of Spafford, livin' here in town, an' she was allers goin' on 'bout art in the higher form,—if you get what I mean, as Hazel Devine says. An' so we was bluffed into lettin' her plan the decorations for the Thanksgivin' services. She come over for me in the afternoon, to let me have a sort of dress-rehearsal-look at what she'd accomplished. I tell you, she'd jest turned her art wide open an' jumped for safety. She'd filled the chancel with stacks of wheat, punkins an' apples, until the place looked more like a barn than a House of God. Then she put some nice bunches of celery in the vases on the altar, and jus' naturally filled the place up from top to bottom.

She asked me what I thought about it. I said that if she would hang a festoon of onions across the front of the altar, with a picked chicken at each end, the thing would be a perfect dream."

"Rather cruel of you, Mrs. Todd," Blake summed, shaking his head, but still laughing. "What did she say to that?"

Neevey chuckled.

"Why, she got so mad she nearly lost her religion. She allowed that if her efforts to uplift the artistic sense of the community by appropriate religious symbolism, or somethin' to that effect, wasn't appreciated, the best place she could find in the church would be outside it. How was that for high? Jest as I said at first: You never can have any fun with some folks. They dunno how to take a joke. I'm allers sorry for folks as is born without a sense of the ridiculous. Life must be an awful grind to them. Next to a new tooth-brush, or a liver pill, a wholesome sense of the ridiculous makes you feel better'n anythin' else. At any rate, it helps you over a lot of hard places in life, an' keeps you from makin' a fool of yourself."

Dabney came for her later, and as they walked home Blake gazed after them admiringly. They were so surely what they seemed — honest, hard-

headed but tender-hearted country folks. Close in money matters, perhaps but kindly withal; and Blake hesitated a moment for the word to complete his thought. Efficient! Yes, that was it — efficient!

Chet had seen Nance, but their talk had been beside the mark. Nance had managed that. It had not been lack of courage that held Chet back. He knew what he must say to her some day, but he realized that he did not now possess the tact to do it gracefully. He knew also that Nance had given him little reason to think his interfering with her affairs would be received any too kindly.

Dabney, wiser than most, kept the boy busy from morning till night, certain that hard work was the best thing for people "off their feed," as he put it. Dabney, supreme when the occasion demanded, had temporarily silenced Neevey's fears about their son by going over to see Joe Pelot himself, and by verifying his belief that Larry Shayne was trying to purchase Nance's farm. Once he could make sure of this all-important fact, he knew that with a little time and patience he could discover the motive for Shayne's peculiar activities.

Of all this Chet knew nothing. And Dabney rightly intended that he should not. If Chet wanted

the girl, he would, according to his father's creed, have to make his own fight for her. Dabney Todd was farsighted enough to realize that it was on the girl herself that Chet must decide — unaided.

CHAPTER XI

“HOSS SENSE”

TAKING his regular turn at the forge with Amos, it so happened that Chet was in the shop when Lije Conklin brought his horse to be shod. Dabney and his two sons looked it over suspiciously. All three knew horses. This one was a tall roan, with a long neck, white-rimmed, evil eyes and an aggressively upstanding mane and tail. Lije had bought him only a few days before at an auction — and if life has any grab-bag chances to offer, surely it is at the horse-auction, whether in city or country.

The roan evidently had made up his mind that he did not want to be shod; for, as Amos approached, he lashed out with his hind foot viciously.

“Hello!” exclaimed Amos. “He’s insulted if you even look at him. Mean, ain’t he, Lije?”

“He’s got me plumb buffaloed,” confessed Lije, picking up a hammer from a bench. “I’ll knock his

durned head off if he don't behave.” Then, to the horse, commandingly: “Here, you! What's the trouble?”

Lije was going forward in a dignified way, but all his dignity was shivered to splinters, as the roan went for him with both heels at once.

“I'm through!” confessed Lije. “See what you can do with him, Amos.”

Amos was game. He went up to the animal on one side, while Lije tried to get within reach of his head on the other. The roan was vigilant and both were compelled to jump back out of the danger zone, but not before he had kicked the hammer out of Lije's grasp.

“Almost got you that time, Lije!” remarked Dabney, as he came into the shop.

“Took the skin off'n a finger,” growled Lije. “He's goin' to pull away from that wall, too. Wouldn't s'prise me a hull lot if he took the wall with him.”

“He's a jim-dandy, ain't he?” commented Amos. “Acts like we'd have to hoist him into the rack if ever we cal'late to git them shoes off him — say nothin' 'bout puttin' on new ones.”

“That's what,” assented Lije. “He's the peskiest goat I ever tried to handle. Looks like he don't

cal'late to have you do nothin' with him, nohow."

"Oh! we'll fix him up, all right," Dabney assured him; "Amos ain't afraid o' nothin' they bring in."

"I'll bet a cooky that in his best days Daddy'd have stood back an' thought awhile afore he'd ha' tackled an old he-lion like that," thought Amos.

It was at this moment that Tite Showell and Spencer Howe sauntered over from Link Watkins' store and wisely looked the horse over.

"'Pears like that roan's givin' you boys a heap o' trouble," remarked Spencer. "Queer how a hoss will keep a-trouncin' around an' cuttin' up, when he might know he'll have to give in at last."

"That's so," sniffed Tite Showell. "When a hoss has to have shoes, they're goin' to be fixed on him somehow or 'nother. If they ain't no other way, I recommend you lay him on his back an' clamp his legs in a vise, so's he can't kick. That ought to hold him."

"I wouldn't talk like that, Tite," Dabney said dissentingly. "Don't sound right. An' they ain't no call for the Deacon to go into a laughin'-gas fit over it, nuther."

"Oh, I dunno," retorted Spence, nettled. "I thought what Tite said was real funny. An' it comes purty nigh bein' true, as well."

“ ’Tain’t true! ” declared Dabney, sharply. “ ’Bout that roan or no other hoss. S’fur’s I see, Lije an’ Amos ain’t goin’ the right way to git him where they want him. Trouble is they don’t study him nowheres but in his hind feet. They ain’t no logic in *them*. If you want to know what to do with a hoss what’s actin’ contrairy, go to his head an’ git at what’s in his mind. ’Course that ain’t no ways easy. I ain’t sayin’ it is.”

“ You bet it ain’t! ” put in Chet, soberly. “ No,” he went on. “ A horse can think of only one thing at a time — an’ mos’ gen’ally he’s thinkin’ of some dummed thing you don’t expect.”

“ That’s gospel truth,” Howe agreed. “ It’s as true as the comin’ o’ spring. The wust of a hoss is that as soon as he thinks o’ somethin’, he goes right ahead an’ does it, an’ if you don’t have a tight line on him, you may go over the plow-handles or the dash of the buggy — whichever you happen to be drivin’— afore he changes his mind, or you find out what he’s thinkin’ about.”

“ Hosses is always changin’ what little mind they got,” put in Tite Showell. “ Of all the dum critters on earth, they’re the dumbest. The power they give, for the feed they git, makes ’em the most expensive of all motors, an’ they kill more human

bein's a year than any other animal. Don't talk hoss to *me!* "

"This blamed roan has been actin' up like a groundhog with his tail in a trap, dad," put Amos, in an aggrieved tone. "You see how he dum nigh killed Lije a while ago. If he'll take my advice, he'll sell him back to the man he bought him of, or saw him off on some one else that wants somethin' with a dash o' cussedness in him."

Dabney Todd walked slowly toward the horse, facing him, and careful not to make any abrupt movement.

The roan rolled his eyes, showing a larger rim of white than ever; at the same time the breath came faster from the dilated nostrils, and he quivered nervously.

"Who-a, babe!" soothed Dabney. "I ain't goin' to hurt ye. They been gittin' ye all excited, ain't they? That's the hull trouble. You're some high-strung, an' you don't want shoes on ye 'less you're sure it ain't goin' to pain that sore foot o' your'n."

"Sore foot?" cried Lije, in surprise. "Is anythin' wrong with him that a-way?"

"Off hind foot been cut with wire or somethin'," returned Dabney. "I seen the blood soon as I

come in. 'Tain't nothin' much, but it's enough to make him skeery when you go to tetch it.”

By this time Dabney was near enough to the horse to reach out and touch him, stroking his nose gently.

“There! Ye needn't back away. This ain't goin' to do ye no harm. Once ye git it into ye that you're among friends, you'll skitter right down an' be good. I know ye will.”

Dabney drew closer and pushed up the horse's lip, to look at his teeth. He did this from force of habit, almost without realizing what he was about.

“H'm! You're young, ain't ye? Only risin' eight. Couldn't expect ye to act like you was eighteen. But you've had enough shoes nailed on to know it ain't no painful operation. Lemme look at that sore hock. Say, Chet! Bring some warm water an' a sponge.”

While Chet retired to the stable for the things his father wanted, the latter stooped and very gently ran his hand down the roan's hind leg — first, however, obtaining a firm grip on the tail, to hold it down.

“A hoss can't kick without liftin' his tail,” he observed, quietly. “Not that this one is aimin' to kick no more, now he's quieted down.”

“I wouldn't trust him,” grunted Lije.

"No, you wouldn't trust him — an' that's most of the trouble," rejoined Dabney. "Don't you think he knows you're suspicious of him — an' afraid of him? It don't do to go nigh a hoss feelin' that way, if you want him to do what you want. You couldn't git a *man* to be wuth a durn to you if he knowed you didn't like him an' was afraid to trust him. An' I am tellin' you that hosses is pow'ful like men — on'y more so. . . . Put that water an' sponge down over here, Chet, while I see how bad he's hurt."

Tenderly, Dabney lifted the foot. His experienced eyes told him at once that the horse had picked up a piece of wire somewhere, which had wrapped itself around the hock. Probably it had been soon thrown off, but not before doing some damage. The injury was slight, but sufficient to make the high-spirited creature nervous and resentful when at all roughly approached.

"It takes a vet'nary surgeon to handle a thing like that, dad," said Amos, rather apologetically. "I don't purtend to be that. I'm jest a blacksmith. I can shoe a hoss, but I ain't no surgeon."

"Nuther am I," growled Dabney, without looking up from his occupation of gently bathing the hock with warm water.

“Why, yes, you are,” corrected Lije. “Leastways, I’ve allers thought you was. I don’t know another man in New Canaan that can hold a candle to you, in this line. If anybody had oughta have a degree of Vet’nary Surgeon, it’s you!”

“No, sir,” insisted Dabney. “Don’t you git that idee into your head, Lije Conklin. I’m jest a plain hoss doctor. I ain’t never claimed to be nothin’ more, s’fur’s I recollect’. I can doctor a hoss, or a cow, an’ mos’ gen’ally I know what’s the matter with a dog or cat when they git off their feed or acts any other way ’s ain’t right. But I ain’t never laid no claim to a diplomy — with Latin and English mixed up in it.”

The washing of the wound was complete by this time. The horse had stood perfectly quiet, evidently enjoying the comfort of the warm water. Dabney put on some salve of his own composition. Then, standing up, he announced that the roan could now be shod without trouble.

“Air you plumb sure of that, Dabney?” asked Lije, incredulously. “I’d ruther see you put him in the rack, if there’s any doubt about him behavin’ while Amos shoes him. It’d save a heap of time, and you’d be sure there wouldn’t be no fight in him — leastways, none that you couldn’t handle.”

Dabney regarded Lije Conklin curiously. At last he replied, in slow, even tones:

"Wa'al, I reckon you're correct 'bout bein' able to handle him if we was to fix ropes an' straps all over him, so he couldn't make even a wiggle. Then we could lift him clear of the floor, and he wouldn't have no more chance than a mosquito in a spider's web. But, would you call that givin' the hoss a square deal?"

"Why not?" growled Lije.

"Wa'al, you'd hate to have some feller offer to lick you if you'd have yourself put into a straitweskut fust, with yer hands strapped to your sides an' hobbles on your feet. You'd kinder think he was seekin' a sort of undue advantage, wouldn't you?"

"That's different!" objected Lije.

"I dunno 's it's so very different," replied Dabney. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll have Chet take off them front shoes fust, and put one on. After that, if the hoss stands anyways still, I reckon we may say he's safe, and we'll fit on his other three shoes. Git at it, Chet."

"All right, Dad!"

Chet took off the two old shoes without any objections from the horse. Then he put on a new one without difficulty.

The roan pulled at his halter and swayed occasionally, but not more than any horse might while being shod. When the shoe was nailed on and Chet put the foot down, the horse stood quietly waiting for the other foot to be picked up. All his nervousness had vanished.

“There you be, Lije,” said Dabney, patting the roan’s neck. “The main p’int allers is to find out what’s makin’ him nervous, an’ do away with that. Another thing I’ll tell you — it’s a dummed sight easier to control a hoss in a blacksmith shop with warm water an’ a soft sponge, than by hittin’ him with a hammer-handle, jest as it’s easier to make a man good by givin’ him decent work at liberal wages than it is by slavin’ and starvin’ him, and jailin’ him when human nater rebels.

“Nater’s all one, whether plant, animal or human — an’ she always yields her fruit accordin’ to the soil. If preachers, teachers, editors, reformers an’ politicians knew that little thing, an’ acted accordin’, we’d have a dum sight better world than what we have, to-day.”

He smiled a trifle enigmatically, then turned and walked out of the shop, leaving a germ or two of new ideas to root in the consciousness of his hearers.

CHAPTER XII

CASH BAILEY STIRS THE COALS

THESE were days that found Chet strangely aloof from his accustomed haunts. Singularly enough, the quiet woods and running brooks called to him, and he found great solace in seeing them through Nance's eyes. All of the many little things she had pointed out came back to him on these solitary vigils. For hours at a time, in the gathering dusk of evening, he would stretch himself out in the tall wiregrass, under the giant elms standing guard upon Storm King, and from this vantage point watch the smoke curling up from the little village, dreaming of Nance, intent on finding some way to go to her and say what was in his heart.

Aimlessly wandering down the road to-night, he had left the village behind, and almost gained the old stone bridge over the Onondaga, when he saw a strange little camp pitched beside the road.

An auto had been driven down a narrow side

road, a short distance from the main highway, and from its side a small shelter tent was staked out. Chet could see a man tinkering over the fire, and to his nostrils came the appetizing odor of frying bacon. A giant Llewellyn setter at the man's side barked at the boy, and, as the stranger turned, Chet recognized Cash Bailey.

"Hello, Chet!" was Cash's cheery greeting. "Just in time. Had supper?"

"Yes, thanks. Nice evening!"

"Every evening's nice, if you know how to take it," Cash answered, "but I'll admit this one is nicer 'n most."

"What you doin' here?" asked Chet. "You ain't gave up the store, have you?"

"No, not for good. But I'm on an outdoor trip, just now, with a line of stock that goes great in the country — some extra nice tinware, brooms, calicoes, doilies, table-covers, paper lamp-shades an' other art-goods too numerous to mention. It's too fine weather to be indoors, Chet. I'm glad to be on the road. There's something about being outdoors that gets under my skin. I've figured out a philosophy regarding it that's almost as satisfying as selling goods."

Chet had flung himself into the cool grass, and

was filling his pipe, with a reflective face, while Cash went on with his preparations for supper.

Chet watched him while he ate, and, as he observed the kindly Cash, a great envy of this wayside philosopher, who seemed never to have been touched by care or sorrow, came over him. The boy wondered what had first sent him over the hills and far away in the first little wagon Cash had ever owned.

"Why'd you ever do it?" asked he. "What made you ever take to peddlin' goods, outside the store? Most merchants are willin' to set still an' let the tide come to 'em. How'd you happen to begin goin' out after it?"

"Well, Chet," Cash smiled. "As an Indian would say, that's a heap big question. For every reason in the world, I guess, but mostly because I wanted freedom. Freedom of action, and thought, and you don't find it within four walls. You've got to be out on the highway, looking down from the hills on the countryside smiling in the sun, or sleeping under the stars, to get that. I walk, or ride, where I will. My thoughts are as free as the wind. And you're not standing still, either. Don't fool yourself there, Chet. You're growing all the time. Why, the mountains were flat once. It may have been millions and millions of years ago. But to-day

you see them towering to the clouds and you can hardly believe that they were ever anything but what they are. Men don't take so long to develop, but the principle holds good."

Cash filled his pipe, and puffed contentedly for a while, before he began washing his dishes in the little stream. Then he went on:

"Did you ever sleep out in the open? Well, if you haven't, you don't know what real sleep is. I work all day, going from farmhouse to farmhouse, with now and then a hamlet or village, to vary the monotony. I've talked till I'm hoarse, but I've sold goods. Well, evening comes, and I climb a big hill, with its secret of what's beyond, and maybe, when I get to the top, I see the sun going down on the other side of the lake, setting the bushes and sedge-grass on fire, and lighting up the big trees. Or maybe it's just something I've seen a hundred times before — but it's beautiful. And then it's supper time. I look around for a place to camp for the night. It's hiding down there somewhere in a nook of the valley, and I go around down the hill as fast as I can, the brakes screaming and the blue smoke from the exhaust trailing out behind." Cash paused, and looked away at the distant sunset. "Chet, you can't buy that kind of fun."

The spirit of wanderlust that Cash breathed in with the air had begun to catch Chet.

"Give me a towel and let me help," he pleaded, ready to have Cash go on for hours.

"That's freedom, Chet! And it's free as the air. You're in the lap of God Himself when you're out in the open country, and man's petty laws aren't worth thinking of. Or if you get to the lowlands, you pass a farmhouse, perhaps, and you see the farmer and his hired man coming out of the stable or driving the cows to pasture. They've done their chores, and soon they'll be goin' to sound sleep. It is their nightly reward for a hard day's labor. And, Lord! Chet! You know how hard a man works on a farm?"

"Don't I?" commented Chet, sententiously.

"The chickens have gone to bed, but, as you pass the hen-roost, you can hear 'em bickerin' and scratchin'. Once in a while you'll hear the 'tweet!' of a robin or the caw of a crow. Did you ever notice how pretty a crow can sound when you hear him at sundown? Seems impossible to you, eh? Well, you just listen, next time. But it's the man on the road who gets close to crow nature — and every other kind of nature. When God created this earth, He didn't put man in a house, did He? Not by a

jugful. He gave him a Garden to live in, with fruit, flowers, running streams — the beauties His hand had made — all round him. I tell you, Chet, a man needs the fresh soil to bring out the best that's in him. He wasn't made to live inside of four walls, with a man-made roof over him. Nor to work that way, either. No, sir!"

"I'm beginnin' to think so myself," returned Chet, slowly, "workin' day after day in a blacksmith shop, doin' the same thing over and over, with the smoke and smell of burnin' hoofs always in your nostrils. I tell you, Cash, I'm tired of it. The dignity of labor that folks like to talk about, so much, is usually praised most by them that ain't ever had so much as one small blister on their hands, from work. I want somethin' new. I want to make a change."

"Well, why don't you?"

The question came abruptly, as Cash Bailey turned his keen eyes upon his companion and looked him over from head to foot in the fast-gathering gloom.

"How? What could *I* do? I don't know anythin' about sellin' goods from a wagon. Every man to his trade, Cash."

"Piffle! You don't have to peddle goods from

a wagon. Abraham Lincoln was a rail-splitter at one time; Andrew Johnson a shoemaker, Marshall Field a five-dollar-a-week clerk. *You* are a blacksmith. What of that? You can be anythin' your ambition desires. Any one can. All a man needs to get ahead is vision. Understand? Vision, and the will to follow it."

Chet nodded thoughtfully.

"What do you intend to be, Chet? Are you content to be just Dabney Todd's son, shoein' horses and mendin' plows and cultivators? You say yourself you're tired of that, already. Good for you! It's a hopeful sign. Some of these days you're goin' to break away from it all — and the sooner you do the better you'll be."

"But I don't know anythin' but my own business," the boy put in.

"All right! You can mend anything that has iron and steel in it, and you know how to make a gas-engine work when it gets cranky. Why, Chet, you've got a great opportunity here. You can repair automobiles. Yes, sir!"

"I *have* done it," broke in Chet. "Nigh a dozen times autos have had trouble in New Canaan. Sometimes it would be only a bit of dirt in the carburetor, cracked plug, or a broken fan-belt, or it

might be somethin' worse. I was always able to fix 'em."

"Good! Now, why don't you go in the automobile business altogether?"

"Sell 'em?"

"Not only that. Open a garage of your own, where you can do repairs — or have your men do 'em. Get the agency for some good standard machines, and demonstrate 'em to your customers. There's plenty of openings. In fact, the right man makes his own opening, and I am banking on your being that kind of fellow, Chet. Of course, it'll take grit and you'll have troubles enough to make you hate yourself. Some men give it all up before getting well started. But, Chet, I don't believe you're a quitter."

"I don't believe I am either," answered Chet with a certain grimness. "I don't seem to remember anythin' I ever really set out to do, that I didn't finish."

"Then here's your chance. I'm not goin' to tell you just how you're to start. If you can't figure that out for yourself, you wouldn't make a success after you'd started. A part of this round world is yours — as it is any man's. Jump in and grab your share. You'll have to fight for it, and hit hard.

The other fellow will be tryin' to beat you out of it. But handle him the way you do a horse that don't want you to shoe it — easily, if you can, but with a good solid grip when you must."

"I'd certainly like to be in the automobile business!" Chet exclaimed. "Think of it, Cash, my own business! A garage of my own! Why, I'd put a real stage line in between here and half a dozen other towns, and I'd make it pay. I'd sell cars, too."

"Well, you'd better think this thing over, Chet," Cash agreed, adding enigmatically: "It would be good for your complaint."

"Complaint? What d' you think's the matter with *me*?"

"Don't you s'pose I can see that somethin's on your mind? A husky fellow like you don't go walkin' out into the country alone in the evening, not goin' nowhere in partic'lar, and stoppin' once in a while to pull leaves off a bush, or kick stones out of his way, forgettin' to go on again for a while, unless there's some reason inside. I know. In my business I see no end of people; and women I sell things to often will drop a remark that tells me they're in trouble, even when they don't say so outright."

A short silence fell between the two. Then:

"I got walking out into the country for the same reason that you like it," said Chet, ignoring the last part of Cash's speech. "I feel the need of freedom — of bein' some place where I can fill my lungs with pure air, and where I can jump and kick, and yell, if I want to."

"But you don't kick and yell; you just shuffle along like a lame calf, and have about the same look on your face, if you'll excuse my sayin' so. You ain't playin' the game, Chet. This evenin's sunset was the prettiest I've seen this summer. What do you know about it? If anybody'd asked you quick, you wouldn't ha' been able to say whether it was the sun or the moon goin' down back of that wood over there. Fresh air is fine, but you've got to take it in with long breaths, or it don't do you any good. I'll tell you more about what's the matter with you — the cause o' your heartache."

Chet did not speak. Moodily, he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, waiting for Cash to go on.

"Want me to tell you, Chet?"

The boy nodded.

"Girl!" exploded Cash Bailey. "Just girl! I know the signs!"

Chet turned upon his companion almost fiercely,

bending forward so that he could look straight into his eyes.

"Who d' you mean?" he demanded. "What girl?"

"How should I know?" laughed Cash. "Any girl would have the same effect on you, if you wanted her. Her name ain't of any importance in this discussion. Whether it's Sally, Ann or Prue, Kate, Jemima or Clara Jane, it's all one, so far as makin' you go lollygaggin' round, moonstruck and mis'able. A rose by any name would smell as sweet. A best girl, by any name whatsoever, always spoils the appetite an' upsets the pulse, if she's really an' truly got the hooks into you."

Chet relaxed in the grass, and looked up at the stars, as he answered quietly:

"I calc'late that's so. Every fellow that likes a girl thinks she's the only one, I reckon. But you're only guessin' about that with me, Cash. Still, if it was true —"

"I hope it is true," swiftly interrupted Cash Bailey. "Because that 'll help you to win."

"Money?"

"Oh, yes — money, of course. That's what you go into business for — to make the long green. Not only because you want to pile up a whole lot

of it, but because there's so much fun in makin' it. It's like fishin'. I've seen a man pull a two-pound trout out o' the water, and, after lookin' it over, give it away. Why? Because he didn't want the fish so much as the sport of landin' it. He'd been playin' for that fish with his fly-rod and half a dozen different kinds of flies for two hours, and he'd enjoyed every minute. There you are! It's the same in business, if a man's made o' the genuine stuff."

"But I want money," declared Chet. "Lots of it!"

"Of course you do — especially if there's a girl. You've got to do it for her. But the money isn't everything with her, neither. When a girl gets married, she wants somethin' in her home besides a lot of talk about crops and potato-bugs. You've got to be a man of the world, in a way, if you want to make a woman happy and contented in her own home. Lord! How a woman does admire a fighter — a fellow who does things! He don't need to be a big husky chap like you, neither, Chet — if he's got the brains. If some girl's worryin' you, go to her and find out what's what. Worryin' about it and moonin' to yourself won't help none!"

Thus Cash and Chet talked till very late; and when Cash bade the boy good-night, a new deter-

mination shone in Chet's eyes — a light that would have gladdened the heart of Nance Pelot, had she been able to see it there. So busy was Chet with his thoughts that he had reached home before he realized he was even in the village.

CHAPTER XIII

DABNEY'S TRANQUILLITY IS DISTURBED

THOUGH Chet was slow to become enthusiastic, once he had been aroused he clung with a tenacity of purpose that never acknowledged defeat. In this he followed his father's footsteps, for one of Dabney's favorite aphorisms was: "Many a bulldog's been licked, an' then in the end chawed up the other dog, simply because when he *was* licked he didn't know it!"

Cash Bailey had fired the boy with strange ideas, and Chet awoke next morning determined to talk things over with his father.

"Dad," he blurted out, bluntly, "I'm goin' to sell that forty acres you gave me last year, if you'll let me."

They were at breakfast. Amos had already gone to work.

"Why, Chet, what's wrong with the place now?" Dabney asked incredulously. "I figured that farm was a right val'able piece of land."

"None finer round here," Chet agreed. "But I'm aimin' to make more money than I'm gettin' out of that farm. What do you say to buyin' it back?"

Dabney carefully set down the saucer in which he had been rocking and blowing his tea, and stared with some astonishment at his son.

"Now, Chet," he warned, "don't you go tryin' to slip one over on your paw. Don't you git to thinkin' you're goin' to shake me down for a fancy price just 'cause you're one of the fam'ly. You go an' sell that farm, if you want to — she's yourn — but I sure would do some thinkin' 'fore I let go on her. What're you plannin' on doin' with all that money, anyhow?"

"I'm goin' to build a fireproof garage and go in the automobile business."

It came straight from the shoulder, and Chet anxiously watched his father's face.

"There'll be a barrel of money in it, dad, if I work it right," Chet continued eagerly. "I'll buy an' sell machines, repair 'em, an' carry a full line of accessories for automobilists on the road. I'll put in a gasoline tank an' make a good thing out o' that. I'll sell oil and pick up a dollar every way I turn. Won't you help me do it, dad? Won't you?"

Dabney's answer was a flank attack.

"Chet Todd," he boomed, "you never figured all that out by yourself. No, sirree! Where'd you git this idea, huh? Who you been talkin' to?"

"Cash Bailey."

There was no hesitation in Chet's manner any longer.

"Cash Bailey!" Dabney ejaculated. "I might ha' knowed it. First he sells my wife a shirtwaist made o' stuff that warn't intended for nothin' else but a uniform for the Kiltie band, an' now he gits my son a-wantin' to sell his farm, to go in the automobile business. Gosh all hemlock! What'll he have me doin' next?"

"Don't you go flyin' off the handle about Cash, dad!" Chet put in. "Here I've been goin' along doin' nothin' in particular, just waiting for something to turn up, and it makes me sick. I don't get a chance that way. Cash is right. If you're goin' to get anywhere, you got to do your own rowin'."

"Son," laughed Dabney, "you're sure plumb het up 'bout this, ain't you?"

"I got my mind made up, if that's what you mean, dad. I ain't goin' to go on like Amos. Shoein' hosses an' repairin' cultivators, and the like, ain't goin' to satisfy me. I want my own business, an' I'm goin' to get it, some way. If I make good,

they'll say what a smart boy you got — and if I don't, they'll just as surely give me the laugh. But I'll take that chance."

"Wa'al, now, Chet," said Dabney, kindly, "you ain't never heard of your dad lettin' any one give his boys the laugh if he was able to keep him from doin' it, have yuh?"

Chet read the assurance in his father's eyes. He pushed back his chair and leaned across the table toward him.

"You mean I get a chance to do this, dad?" he cried eagerly. "You mean you don't call me crazy to think automobiles are what this town needs? And you'll give me the money to start?"

"Yep," Dabney said, knowingly, his eyes half closed, as he pondered the matter. "I cal'late, all bluffin' aside — an' bluff's a mighty useful thing, at times, to make the other feller show his hand — I cal'late you hit a good idee, in this. You're showin' real Todd grit an' sense. You're lookin' ahead now, when you're talkin' autymobiles, an' it's only men who look ahead that get ahead. They'll have lots of autymobiles here or bust, some day. If you start now, you'll be ready when the time comes, and the man on the job does the business."

Dabney's mind wandered for a minute.

"How fine that'll be, Chet," he went on, at last. "Hosses are gittin' scarce. People are usin' 'em less an' less, until soon they won't need 'em much for anythin' but plowin' an' cultivatin'. Work'll be gittin' scarcer an' scarcer all the time down to the old shop, and you, my boy, will be on the job, ready to give 'em the new things they'll want then. Growin' up with 'em, so to speak, an' keepin' the name of Todd on top."

"You really think I'll succeed, then?" asked Chet, excitedly.

"Uh-huh. Every one usually does that's got brains an' energy. Life had oughta mean success, if it means *anythin'*. I cal'late whatever Power made this world, meant for all to have enough, an' nobody to suffer want in such a garden o' plenty. Yes, Chet, you'll git thar all right, if no greedy, graspin' hawg pushes in an' does you out of the results of your labors."

"I won't let 'em!" exclaimed Chet, with vigorous determination.

"You can't always help it," said his father sagely. "Hog nature is sometimes too strong in some people to be overcome by the human nature in others. Jest as some shoats will git their feet in the trough—usually the runts, at that—an'

crowd out all the others, so they's men will try the same dodge, in the game of life. These here trust maggots —"

"Magnates, father."

"Maggots I said, an' maggot I mean!" affirmed Dabney, decidedly. "Don't they illustrate it? Don't they raise prices, make shoddy goods, buy an' sell legislatures, crowd the little kids into their mills an' mines an' fact'ries, an' then when their men complain, shoot an' jail 'em? Don't they make wars between nations, strew the battlefields with dead men, an' fill the world with orphans an' widders, I'd like to know?"

Chet remained silent a moment, pondering.

"Now," continued Dabney, after a little pause, "if the people that do the work only got the reward, it'd be all right, I cal'late. The world belongs to them that tills an' mines an' builds an' sows an' reaps, not to them that plots an' schemes an' cheats an' gambles in stocks an' bonds. *Some day we'll git sense enough to take from each accordin' to his ability, an' give to each accordin' to his need.* That'll be the millenyum, I reckon. But till then, Chet, we got to look out for the maggots. We have 'em right here in New Canaan, on a small scale — same principle, only weaker. So, when you git

into business, watch out! Watch out, boy, that's all I got to say! An' good luck to you. When d'you reckon you'll need that there money?"

Chet walked on air that day. Plans had to be formed, a location selected, arrangements made to get the agencies he wanted, and a hundred other things. The boy's mind was filled to overflowing with enthusiasm for his task. Man-like, in the first flush of business activity, he forgot Nance for the time being.

Surely Cash had been right. Already people were beginning to treat him with a new dignity. He was no longer just Dabney Todd's son, but a full-grown man, ready to take his place in the world, and if he thought of Nance at all, it was only to wonder what she would say to all this.

Dabney idled away the entire morning in the little office in his shop. This was for him quite an unusual proceeding.

Chet had started the train of thought that worried him now. Was it possible, he asked himself, that a great, big overgrown boy like Chet, could generate all that ambition of his own accord? Dabney allowed for Cash's influence, and still knew he had not answered himself.

The Redburn stage pulled in about ten o'clock on

its morning trip. Now Jed Peters, who drove it, was sweeping it out and tinkering with the engine over in front of Watkins' store, while Dabney, sitting where he was, watched him with interest.

The stage would not leave on its return trip until two in the afternoon. So Jed took his time, and Dabney still found him interesting. Somehow, the stage seemed to intrude into the question he was debating with himself. The connection eluded him for a long while.

It suddenly hit him a broadside.

"Sufferin' cats!" he ejaculated. "That's it — Nance Pelot!"

Starting, he knocked half the litter on his desk to the floor; and as he bent over, picking it up piece by piece, "Dabney!" he murmured, "you're gittin' downright stupid!"

For a man who was stupid, Dabney did a lot of quick thinking during the short walk home to dinner. When he drove Diamond out of the barn, a few minutes after he had left the table, Neevey got a noncommittal answer to her question as to where he "cal'lated hikerin' to, *now?*"

Jed Peters carried very few passengers on his afternoon trips, and as Dabney drove up to Link Watkins', a few minutes before the stage was due

to leave, he saw that Nance was the only passenger.

"Hello, Nance!" he greeted her. "Better jump in here and ride with me. I happen to be goin' over to the city."

Nance entertained a real fondness for Dabney, in spite of the fact that his prosperity always served to remind her of her father's broken fortunes. She knew, of course, no blame attached to Dabney, in the matter; and then, too, Dabney was such a kind-hearted, shrewd, humorous old fellow — and above all, was he not the father of Chet?

Now, however, she shrank from accepting his offer. For some time — in fact, ever since having begun work for the unspeakable Jew, Morris Rosenblatt — she had tried her best to keep to herself. And just now, of all times, she certainly did not fancy the long ride to Redburn with him, and the opportunity it offered for conversation.

"Thanks, Mr. Todd," she smiled. "I guess I won't, this time."

"You sure are going to change your mind, Nance," he answered whimsically. "Seein' as how I hitched up for the express purpose of takin' you over. I ain't recollectin' any business that's callin' me to Redburn."

Nance could not have told what decided her to

accept his invitation. Surely those smiling eyes meant her no harm.

When Jed came out, ready to start, Nance and Dabney were a long way down the road. As he passed them he waved his hand at Dabney calling him four kinds of a "hoss thief."

They were passing Nance's farm before Dabney found what he wanted to say to her. All the way out he had been covertly watching and appraising her. No wonder, he thought, that Chet wanted the girl. The finely-chiseled mouth and nose appealed to him compellingly.

"Nance, you ain't changed your mind 'bout sellin' that farm?" he said, as he pointed toward it with his whip.

"Hardly, Mr. Todd," she asserted positively.

"Wa'al, now, I ain't tellin' you all my suspicions, but I got 'em, an', if I was you, Nance, I wouldn't change my mind about lettin' go on it, 'cause jest as sure as you do, you're goin' to make me disappoint yuh, an' I don't want to be downright mean that-a-way."

"I thought my father had made it clear to you that I couldn't sell the old place," she replied.

"Yeh, he did say that, Nance. But I ain't forgittin' I'm not goin' to have a say in the matter after

August, an', as I said before, if what I suspect is true, three months won't be long for them to wait as wants to git it."

"Well, what are you hinting at?" she asked.

Dabney chuckled.

"Nance, I'm ashamed of you, puttin' the buck up to an ole man like that. Why, what I'm thinkin' is so plumb preposterous, I'm dog-goned if I ain't afeerd to tell you. If I'm wrong, this county'd have the laugh on me for the rest of my nat'ral life. No, sirree! I ain't sayin'. But I've got my eyes open, an' I'm doin' a consid'able bit o' seein'—an' listenin'."

Dabney had had his say, and, try as she would, Nance could not find out what he was rolling over in his mind.

They drove along in silence for a while before Dabney turned to her again.

"I'm jest wonderin', Nance," he said, whimsically, "what kind of an ole he-bear you think I be. Now tut, tut! Don't go flatterin' me that-a-way, 'cause I been tryin' to figger out jest what I'd think o' myself if I was you — an' it don't seem to call for no flattery, much. Though they ain't no man can say I took undue advantage on him, or ever turned the corners, when I'd passed my word."

Slowly, gravely, almost as father might have done who had not seen his daughter in years of separation, Dabney Todd began speaking to her of past days and of the long struggles of his existence.

Nance sat absorbed as this old man unfolded his life to her. She knew Dabney well enough to know that it was unusual, and that it in some way bore directly on her.

"I been a savin' man, Nance," he went on. "Never denyin' myself what I ought to have, mind you, but lookin' ahead for a rainy day. Sometimes it rained purty blamed hard for me. Still, I ain't complainin'. Some folks are meant to git on, I allow. Others ain't got the knack of it, an' I'm jest wonderin' if they ain't a notion in that purty little head o' yourn that I got a lot o' things the good Lord intended for your paw."

Something seemed to catch in Nance's throat. All she could do was to shake her head. Not that Dabney was wrong, but because she knew the fault was not his.

"Yes, I guess I'd think a little that way now and then myself, if I was you," he continued, meditatively. "Your paw an' me started even, back there years ago, an' we run along quite nice for a spell, till somethin' slipped up an' hit him a wallop in the

back. Men don't give in to anythin' like he did, with their eyes open. Maybe, I says to myself, God intended Joe Pelot to drink for the example he'd be to somebody else. We ain't no way o' tellin' how He moves the checkers around. But I'll bet He ain't takin' all the good out o' one man without givin' it to some one else."

Nance was sobbing to herself now.

"And I been watchin' you stick to him," continued Dabney, "carin' for him, an' holdin' of your head up — an' I been proud of you. . . . You ain't no quitter, Nance Pelot! I been sittin' back, sort o' despisin' myself 'cause I warn't man enough to come an' tell you what I thought, an' let you know you had a friend you could count on. . . ." Dabney smiled to himself. "Seems that some o' the members o' my family ain't been so backward."

Dabney's voice was getting husky, too.

"But I'm tellin' you now, Nance, when you're in trouble come to me. An' I'd like to know if you want to promise me you won't do nothin' now or after August with that farm, without askin' me about it."

Words just then were beyond Nance, but Dabney felt her slender fingers resting ever so gently on his big, horny fist.

Old Diamond plodded along for a great many minutes before Dabney spoke again.

“ There’s some folks in New Canaan can’t understand you, little girl . . . an’ it’s got ’em worried to death. You mustn’t forget people’s prejudices if you want to be happy — no, sir.”

Since Dabney was now getting near the real purpose of his being there, he hesitated a little over his diplomacy. Despite all his good intentions and his great innate tact in dealing with almost any situation which might arise, he found this a peculiarly delicate place to be in. But, after a little pause, he went on:

“ An’ that brings me to what I want to say to you — it’s jest this — if you want to run round with the Shayne boy, wa’al, I, for one, say it’s nobody’s business but your own. I know there’s them who don’t agree with me, but they don’t bother me. Course, he’s got a purty shady reputation, an’ he’s left his mark on some — but, shucks! Ef you want him, why —”

Had he built her hopes up to dash them to the ground this way? Was this, then, all she could expect? Anger flared in her eyes.

“ Is that the way I have impressed you?” she halted him sharply. “ Is that the kind of girl you think you are offering your friendship to? Do you

know me so little that you can believe I want Larry Shayne — that he can be anything to me? ”

Dabney met her shining eyes, but there was only happiness in his.

“ There, there! ” he soothed her. “ Don’t you go gittin’ all excited that-a-way. I jest wanted to hear you say you didn’t cotton to the stripe of that blackbird. I was sure of you right along, but I wanted to hear you say it. An’ I don’t mind tellin’ you, Nance, your goin’ over to the city two and three nights a week has got my nat’ral curiosity aroused. Now you go on an’ tell me what it’s all about.”

Kindly and patiently, Dabney wheedled it out of her — her need of money, her fear of what folks would say, her repugnance to Larry, and the horror the place held for her.

When she had finished, Dabney was silent before the sacrifice the girl had made. Wisely he shook his head. He was profoundly touched. The endless wonder of woman! He wondered what Neevey would say to this if she knew.

“ Nance,” he said, at last, “ I ain’t aimin’ to be no religious man, but what you’ve jest told me makes me sure God ain’t far away. He’s been givin’ you the courage an’ nerve to keep a stiff upper lip, an’ I guess He ain’t goin’ to forgit you now, noways.

If things git so you can't stand 'em no longer without goin' mad, you come to me. If Joe ain't able to work in a couple of weeks, we'll fix it up some other way."

Insistently she made him promise that Neevey and Chet must not know. Dabney's plea for Chet was in vain.

"You've got to have faith," she said, a far-away look in her eyes, "when you can't understand. If you can't, or don't believe — why, what happens won't matter much. I want it to be so with Chet, Mr. Todd. Won't you give me your promise?"

In the end, Dabney promised, and Nance knew his promises were too sparingly given, ever to be doubted. The old man's word had ever been his bond, and no bond ever written could have held him more tightly than his simple "Yes" or "No."

Though it tremendously embarrassed him, he drove her straight to the doors of the Seneca Inn, and serenely failed to see Larry Shayne staring out at him, unable to believe his own vice-sodden eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

BLUEBIRDS OF HAPPINESS

NEEVEY TODD, passing Nona Haynes' house that same afternoon, heard a lot of girls giggling inside. She stopped involuntarily. Before she could go on, Nona looked out the open window and waved invitingly at Neevey.

"Oh, Mrs. Todd, won't you come in and help us?" she cried. "We've got some fancy sewing we don't know just how to do. We won't keep you very long."

Neevey smiled at the flattery and went in. There came a chorus of "Good afternoon, Mrs. Todd!" and Myrtle Lewis held up a long strip of white linen before her the instant she had settled into a comfortable arm-chair.

"What's that thing?" she asked. "Looks like one o' them cloths I've seen at the circus, with a hole for the colored man's head to go through, when you pay a nickel to throw balls at him. I seen Chet land on him three times, hand-runnin'."

"It's a fudge apron," announced Nona Haynes, solemnly.

"A what?"

"A fudge apron. You know, making fudge is a messy job, and a girl doesn't like to get her nice white waist and skirt all brown and sticky with chocolate. Cash Bailey brought these aprons the last time he was here, and most of the girls bought one. It's a wonder he didn't try to sell you one, Mrs. Todd."

"He knowed better," sniffed Neevey. "But tell me how this thing works."

"Why, you push your head through this hole, and the apron comes down in front and behind. It's stamped for embroidery around the neck, and in front there will be a bird, with wings outspread. Cash said the design was 'Bluebirds of Happiness.'"

"Trust Cash Bailey for giving his goods a fancy name," commented Neevey. "Well?"

"Here's the silk floss, four beautiful shades of blue, for the bluebirds," put in Myrtle Lewis, holding it up. "But none of us knows exactly how to begin. Won't you show us?"

"Me, an ole woman, show you smart young things how to embroider?" protested Neevey, pretending embarrassment. "Land o' livin', you'll git me more

excited than a cat at a mouse-show. Go on 'long with you! "

"Please, please!" begged Myrtle, laughing. "Nobody knows half as much about anything, as you do!"

Neevey could not resist the coaxing, and in a few minutes she had set them all to work, while she went from one to the other, to see how they were getting on.

"Embroiderin' is a thing that has to be done right from the beginnin'," she proclaimed. "I mean that for you, Milly Watkins. You've begun the right wing of that bluebird so nat'ral that it's goin' to seem ready to fly off the apron. But the way you've started the other will make it drop as if it belonged to a sick chicken. You'll have to be careful you don't git the silk raveled, too, or you'll be plumb ashamed o' that work when you git through. I think this fudge apron notion is all foolishness, anyhow. The idee of all you gals comin' together just to make these here things."

"It wasn't only to make fudge aprons," corrected Nona Haynes. "We're going to hold a 'Hope Box' meeting, and we thought we could talk it over while we embroidered."

"What in the world is a hope box?" asked

Neevey. "I b'lieve I've heard the word before, but I don't rightly know, even now, jest what it is."

Hazel Devine — the school teacher — was in the habit of taking a serious and academic view of things. She held up one hand to command attention.

Rather tall and thin, this damsel of about thirty summers and a few extra winters, had been unfortunate enough to have had a smattering of Bostonese impressed upon her in her teens. Now she never let an opportunity pass to remind everybody of the fact.

"A hope box," she elucidated, with her best Boston manner, "is a chest, or drawer, in which a girl places all the things she is preparing for use after she is married."

"You mean, she *hopes* to be married, so she calls it a 'hope box,' Hazel?" tittered Milly Watkins.

Hazel ignored the interruption. "That is my understanding," she went on. "She'll require house linen of all kinds, new clothing for herself, fancy articles of decoration, and so on. Even fudge aprons are good things to put in a hope box."

"Well, now, where is the meeting to be held?" asked Myrtle. "That's the next question."

"At my house," offered Nona Haynes. "Of course, mother's not very well, now, but I'm sure

she will be better by the time we have the meeting. It's to be two weeks from to-day. We settled that before."

There was more discussion of the hope box meeting, but Neevey took no part in it. Indeed, the only reason that kept her after seeing that the girls were all well started on their embroidery, was that she wanted to ask about Nona's mother. This estimable lady had long been New Canaan's most distinguished invalid, her ailments furnishing a subject of gossip that the community would sorely have missed, had the sufferer by any chance been restored to health.

"I s'pose she's in bed, Nona?" she inquired.

"Yes. The doctor said that was the best place for her, and she's taking medicine regularly."

"Medicine?" echoed Neevey, scornfully. "Health is allers more in the open air than in bottles. That's what I told the doctor when I had that bad spell last winter. He 'lowed I was 'bout right, but he had to give me pills and things, too. He decided it was indigestion more'n anything. He pulled me through all right."

"Doctor Rand generally does," remarked Hazel, in her quiet way. "When he doesn't, it is usually because he hasn't been called in time."

"That's so," agreed Neevey, quickly. "Most of 'em is so afraid to spend a dollar on a doctor that they wait till they're nearly dead before they send for him. Then, if he don't raise 'em right out of the grave — the way the Lord did Lazarus — they say he ain't a good doctor. Some folks in New Canaan are so tight, they wouldn't invest a nickel for seed that would give them ten-dollar bills."

"You weren't confined to your bed when you were sick last spring?" asked Hazel, with an effort to change the line of conversation for Clarissa Howe's benefit, Clarissa's well known parsimony being no secret.

"Oh, no. Jest didn't feel right — that was all. Doc Rand give me a list of things I mustn't eat, and said I'd die if I didn't go to bed and keep still. He said my case was a good deal like Tim Cronin's. Well, doctors don't know everything. I made up my mind that if I had to die, I'd do it in the open air. It was late in the spring, and cherries was ripe — some of 'em, at least. So I got a ladder an' things, and I picked cherries off that big tree near our barn for four days. At the end of that time I'd picked enough to make all the cherry-butter I needed for the year, and I was better'n I'd been since I was a young girl."

"You couldn't have been as sick as Tim Cronin," remarked Hazel. "He died."

"Of course he did. He took cold from movin' about the cellar one winter. He was subject to 'em anyhow. He'd take cold if anybody left the piano open after dark. When his wife found how bad he was, she put him to bed and packed hot water bottles all around him. But the cork come out of one o' the bottles, and Tim jumped into the middle of the room, howlin' that he was on fire. That exposin' of him made him worse, an' soon he couldn't set up. He only lived three weeks after that. Well, now, let me look over the work you gals are doin' on your fudge aprons, and I'll go."

"Don't go yet," begged Myrtle. "We're sure to get our work wrong if you leave us."

"If you can't do it when I'm away, you can't make nothin' of 'em anyhow," rejoined Neevey. "What are you laughin' at, Myrtle?"

"I was thinking about poor Tim Cronin, and how easy it was for him to take cold. I guess I oughtn't to laugh, but it seems so funny."

"Well, I was sorry for Tim — an' still more for Norah. She'd been a good wife to him, an' she felt real bad when Tim was laid away. Said she'd most goshawful miss the Saturday night beatin's

he'd been givin' her, regular, for more 'n twenty-seven years. They took the place of massidge an' Swedish gymnastics with her, I reckon. Laughin', be you? All right, girls, laugh away. There's nothin' wicked in laughin' when you see a joke — if it's decent. I used to think it was sinful to have fun. But I tell you gals there ain't nothin's so healthy for the complexion as a good laugh. It may be bad for the teeth, though, if you ain't careful. You remember Mrs. Sullivan, who used to live out the east road, near Plover's Creek? "

"I remember her very well," answered Hazel, completely bored to death.

"Yes. Well, she had too much fun one time. She was at the circus, an' she laughed so hard at the clown, that she cracked her upper plate in two places."

Neevey departed while the girls were still giggling over her last sally, and in a minute or two they all settled down to make final arrangements about the hope box meeting.

They decided, after considerable discussion, that it should be held at Nona Haynes', at the time already set, provided her mother had quite recovered in the meantime.

"Don't forget, girls," laughed Myrtle Lewis,

“that one of the rules of the Hope Box Society will be that whoever is married within a year is to have anything she wants out of all the other girls’ hope boxes. That was my idea.”

“A very commendable one,” pronounced Hazel solemnly. “Charmingly splendid, I should call it — if you comprehend the significance of my allusion.”

CHAPTER XV

BARNEY SHAYNE LAYS DOWN THE LAW

IT was just about the time the girls were leaving Nona Haynes', that Dabney said good-by to Nance in front of Barney Shayne's hotel.

Larry had figured, all along, that once Nance had compromised herself sufficiently to be ignored by the townspeople, she would, in her anger and humiliation, turn to him and provide him with an easy opportunity to get both the girl and the farm. He knew her desire to keep her work in Redburn a secret would bring that result about quicker than anything he could contrive. The sight of Dabney standing out in front, handing the girl down from his buggy, with rough courtesy, was a shock to his plans. He had contemplated nothing of the kind. This development introduced serious complications into his wolf-hunt of the girl.

It was not until Nance was having dinner that Larry joined her. He had made no progress toward getting her consent to sell the farm, and of

late her talk on the subject had become so pointed as to make it a decidedly unpleasant matter to bring up.

On the other hand, his people were demanding action, and had threatened to try and secure the property through other parties, if he could not shortly close the transaction. Larry had raised his price to Nance repeatedly, until now it nearly doubled his original offer. As for the girl herself, Larry knew he had been only marking time. Now, sitting down beside her, jealousy and disappointment showed plainly in his eyes. It was so early that the café was empty and he was glad they were alone.

"Well," he said, with a smile on his good-looking face, "I see father-in-law is right on the job."

Nance understood the reference.

"Father-in-law?" she inquired. "A mighty good friend, I should call him, nothing more. I don't know of anything that would lead you to jump to that conclusion." She paused. "Evidently you aren't pleased at his bringing me here."

"Say, look here, Nance," he cried. "Don't play with me like that. You bet I ain't crazy about seeing that old chromo drive you up here. I've had that Todd family rubbed under my nose till I'm sick of them. Friendship? Humph! I suppose it was

friendship that made Chet Todd chase Martin Doover out of Link Watkins's store because Mart was foolish enough to make a crack at him about you and me. Oh, you didn't know anything about that?" He watched her closely.

"Well, I guess you're the only one who didn't," he continued. "I don't care what you say. I know that rube jack-of-all-trades has got his heart set on marrying you some day."

In vain Nance tried to stop him.

"Yes, and now the old man's got to bringing you over here to work. Course he ain't got anything to do — nothing else to keep him busy. So he goes riding round the country with you. I tell you, Nance, it's all poppycock. I'll bet my life on it, that old mossback's been filling you up with a lot of dope about not selling the farm."

Nance's eyelashes quivered ever so lightly, but it was sign enough. Larry Shayne knew his chance shot had struck home.

"Sure! Of course not! That old miser wants it himself, and he knows if he keeps it away from me, he'll get it in time."

Nance stood up, her cheeks flaming. Her chair, falling over, set up a din in the deserted café.

"You — you beast!" she flung at him.

Larry grasped her hand tightly. The fingers of his other hand held her arm in a vise. The fight was gone out of him now.

"Nance!" he pleaded. "Nance! For God's sake, tell me you ain't thinking of marrying that rube! You can't do it, Nance! You can't! What's he going to be able to give you? You can't tie yourself up for life to a man like Chet Todd! I tell you, I won't let you! — I love you!" he whispered hoarsely. "I love you, little girl — honest to God I do! I'll own this place some day. We'll have money to burn, you and me! Nance — Nance!"

He was beside himself, his voice rising louder and louder, as the girl managed to wrench herself free.

In the doorway stood Barney. His eagle eyes took in the scene instantly. Though ever an indulgent father, his complaisance ceased when it interfered with business.

The boy winced under that glowering gaze.

"You damn fool!" he yelled. "Is this the kind of stuff you're trying to pull on me? They ain't enough people howlin' already — you got to help it along. If you've got any more of this up your sleeve, you go somewhere else and get it out of you. A hell of a lot of help you are to me!"

Larry shrugged his shoulders — but he went. Too well he knew his father even to think, for so much as a single second, of arguing with him.

Barney turned to Nance with a command:

“ You let that kid alone — d’ye understand, miss? If you and him gets into any argument, don’t have it here, or you’ll be lookin’ for a job.”

Nance meekly bowed her head as he stamped out. She knew explanation was useless here.

In the weeks she had been working for him Barney Shayne had not addressed her more than a half-dozen times. Yet Nance knew she could repeat word for word, that minute, if necessity offered, every command he had made.

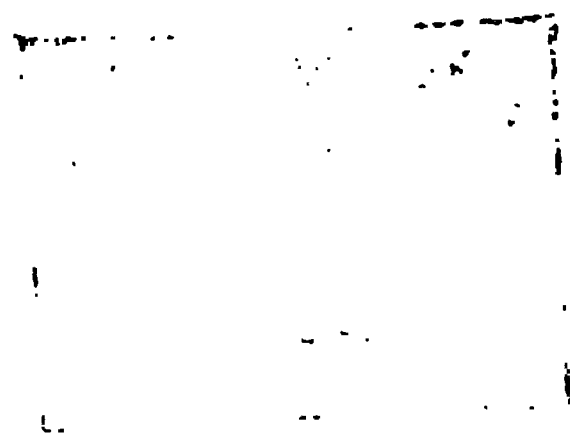
When he spoke, his world moved.

There were times when the place nauseated her, and she wondered if she could go on. Dabney’s offer opened the way for her, but Nance knew she could not avail herself of it without risk of losing Chet.

He must come to her. She could not go to him. That was as final as the law.

That night, staring through the tobacco smoke, and unmindful of the clattering dishes and licentious laughter, she thought of Chet and recalled his anger the evening, so long ago, when he had found her

NANCE'S EYELASHES QUIVERED EVER SO LIGHTLY, BUT IT WAS SIGN ENOUGH. LARRY SHAYNE KNEW HIS CHANCE SHOT HAD STRUCK HOME.



brooding over her father, and the relief in his eyes that she had not heard of his tilt with Martin.

He had been willing to fight for her! He had done the one, big, primitive thing no woman can resist — to throw down the gauge of battle in her behalf!

How well she remembered the first day her father and she had driven over to New Canaan. Their horse had cast a shoe, and Chet had replaced it. She had watched the big muscles playing over his back, and the giant arms of him. Yet he was only a boy — with a boy's face — but he had a man's strength. The friendly walks, the choir work, and all the little intimacies they had known, came back to her.

Sitting there, her eyes and ears filled with the coarseness and tawdriness of the people around her, she saw Chet through everything — and was happy.

CHAPTER XVI

CHET MAKES A START

DABNEY, true to his promise, said nothing to Chet. He had satisfied himself his boy was not building air-castles that would tumble down upon him and break his heart when his efforts and ambitions had ceased to amuse the lady of his dreams.

Chet had walked home from church with Nance several times recently, and a great happiness had dawned in the girl's eyes at knowledge of Chet's determination to strike out for himself.

But there had been no mention of Larry Shayne or Redburn. The multitudinous duties facing Chet absorbed every waking hour. Already the garage was taking shape, and Chet expected to go to Syracuse the following week, to confer with the manufacturers he hoped to represent.

Though the actual work of building the garage had been left to a contractor, the general idea was

Chet's own. He knew what he wanted — an ample fireproof structure, the walls of cement blocks, and the roof of iron and glass.

The erection of such a pretentious building, unlike anything else in New Canaan, naturally caused a flutter in the village, and drew from Link Watkins' store and elsewhere a group of earnest watchers. These had made sage comments from time to time, and would have offered suggestions to the rather fiery Irish contractor, if he would have permitted it.

City or country, the human race can find few diversions more fascinating than idly watching other people work and telling them just what to do. The pointing out of errors, in particular, is a form of sport irresistible to man.

"Reckon we'll all have to git autymobiles now," observed Tite Showell. "When this place is ready, it's goin' to drive you out o' business, Dabney."

"Wa'al, if it does, what then?" rejoined Dabney. "The business'll still be in the family. Besides, I might turn my own shop into a garage if the time ever come when they warn't no more horseshoein' to be done."

"They's one thing," chuckled Paul Cuddeback. "You're purty good at drivin' an autymobile — into an ice meadow, eh, Dabney?"

This allusion caused a general guffaw, and Tite, during the merriment, stepped into the open cement box.

"Stand back there, you fellers!" growled Murphy, the contractor. "Keep out o' my cement, will yer?"

Tite Showell spluttered an incoherent retort, as he tried to scrape the cement off his shoe with a shovel.

"They ain't nuthin' slow about that boy, Dabney," he said later.

"No, sir! Nothin' slow about Chet," nodded Dabney. "He don't need no contractor, as a matter o' fact. He could have done it all himself. But he keeps Murphy right on the job, by tellin' him how well he's doin'. Wa'al, you fellows do the bossin'. I'll have to be gittin' back to my own place, to see how Amos is gittin' along. Horseshoein' ain't played out yet, not by a dummed sight, even if we *are* goin' to have a garage in town."

"Don't see no place for lightnin'-rods," Spencer Howe observed to Tite. "I don't set much store by 'em, 'cause if the good Lord wants to strike a buildin' with a bolt from heaven, nothin' man can do is goin' to stop Him. But a lightnin'-rod is a sort of appeal to Him — a kind o' prayer for mercy

— an' He allers answers prayers when it's His will."

"Maybe Chet figures lightnin'-rods is as ole-fashioned as horses," Tite commented.

Day after day, as the building progressed, there was a crowd of idlers noting and criticizing. By the time it was finished, most of them were certain they could build a garage themselves, if they wanted one.

Among those particularly interested in the new garage was Hazel Devine. Each afternoon she had gone a little out of her way, so that she could pass the building, and always she had chanced to meet Chet and exchange a greeting, following it with a remark as to the progress of the work.

The garage walls were up, and the workmen were putting the roof on, when one afternoon Hazel stopped Chet.

"Mr. Todd, I think your garage is too cute for anything," she began.

"Yes?" responded Chet.

"How can you doubt it? What would we do if it were not for men like you, who think of the higher things — if you understand me. You are going to sell motors, too — aren't you, Mr. Todd?"

"That's one reason why I'm building the garage," replied Chet.

The little school-mistress smiled coyly, and fumbled with a letter in her bag.

"I'm going to impart a secret to you, Mr. Todd," she simpered, with a glance at the boy that indicated she might, had he been willing to listen, have told him a very personal one.

"Thanks!" was Chet's dry answer. "But don't you do nothin' rash, now, Hazel."

"Why, Mr. Todd!" she tittered. "You are so — what shall I say? — *au fait!*"

"Well, I'm going to look that up, and if it's what I think it is, you look out. Now for the secret. What is it?" asked Chet.

"Oh, yes! Well, I thought it would be highly elevating, as well as educational, if you understood me, if I could drive my own car back and forth to school. The children, the dears! would appreciate it, don't you think? We must not forget the example we set the little ones. So I asked papa if he wouldn't buy me an automobile. I told him I could get one here, from you, and that if he would send me the money, I would engage a car at once. And he has consented. So I want you to enter me for one of your very best ones. Something refined — if you understand what I mean. Small, but fashionable. I detest those large, vulgar cars."

Chet was helpless before this avalanche of talk. Here he had sold a car before he had any cars to sell.

“Do you mean you’re ready to buy a car of me now, Hazel?”

“Quite so. This letter I have just received from papa gives his consent, and insures me the required cash when it shall be demanded. I should like you to furnish me with a car as soon as you are open for business.”

“A business man is always open for business,” replied Chet, repeating an axiom that had been impressed upon him by Cash Bailey. “I can promise you the car within two weeks.”

“Oh, Mr. Todd, how perfectly sublime! Do you know, I think the sensation of gliding along the great highway, with no effort on your part, and the engine of your car, like a sentient thing, absorbing its — its —”

“Gas?” suggested Chet. “That’s what makes it run, same as hot air makes lots of people go.”

Hazel’s smile became chilly. The atmosphere grew frigid to such a marked degree. Chet was no fool, and could not help knowing that Hazel Devine had exhibited a ladylike and academic preference for him on many occasions, much to his embarrassment.

She gazed at him now with a thoughtful affection that might lead her to throw herself into his arms, for anything he knew. So he hurried back to the business proposition with which the conversation had begun, and asked her if she was prepared to pay the customary deposit of fifty dollars before he ordered the car.

She nodded her head at him coyly.

"You're a regular business man, aren't you, Mr. Todd? Papa has enclosed a check in this letter. It was that fortunate circumstance that encouraged me to speak to you about the car. And, oh, Mr. Todd, will you really show me how to make myself proficient in the management of my new car?"

"I'll do it, of course," was his short reply. Cash had said nothing about this end of the business. "If you'll come to my father's office I'll give you a receipt for the fifty. Of course you know the make you want?"

"Why, no, Mr. Todd," she hesitated. "Get me one of your prettiest ones. Really I have no preference as to who makes it."

Chet gave her a receipt for the money, and after five minutes of talk about the higher planes of the new freedom, Hazel went her way.

If there was any one in New Canaan, save Nance,

who failed to pass judgment on his business, or the prospects he had of succeeding, Chet could not recall them. Even Joe Pelot had hobbled his way down town to look over the situation.

And yet the one who did not come was the one Chet missed and longed for the most. If he had known, there was no one who wanted to be there so much as Nance. For her it was the realization of Chet's dream, and she felt a strange desire to caress and fondle every bit of brick and stone that had gone into the building of it.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOPE BOX SOCIETY

THE day set for the organization of the Hope Box Society was a beautiful one, with a cloudless sky giving promise of continued fine weather.

By three o'clock everybody invited was in Nona Haynes's home. It had been decided that, besides girls, it would be well to have some of the matrons of the village present, to give steadiness to the proceedings. So Neevey Todd, Clarissa Howe and Mrs. Link Watkins were present.

Hazel Devine opened the meeting by explaining the object of the Society.

"It has been observed," she said, "that some of the brides in New Canaan in the last few years have lacked tablecloths, pillow-slips, quilts and many other luxuries so necessary to the refined home. Sometimes such things have been given to her, but there has been no regularity about it. The Hope

Box Society is therefore greatly needed, especially by such of us as still entertain hopes — I mean — by those who — expect — oh dear, you know what I mean —”

Blushing in her most girlish manner, she glanced about the room.

“Very good!” commended Neevey, anxious to cut Hazel short. “I think we should do good to others while helpin’ ourselves. It’s only single gals who want hope boxes. But, as I am here, I’ll volunteer my services. Let’s git to work.”

Now everybody brought out the particular thing she intended doing, and settled down to sewing. Needles flashed, and the snip-snip of scissors, with an occasional snap of thread, made a musical accompaniment to the trickle of talk that intermittently flowed on and on.

Neevey broke a short silence, as she finished a hem.

“Reminds me of when we was gittin’ ready for your shower, Clarissa, jest afore you married Spencer.”

“Huh-huh!” mumbled Mrs. Howe, without looking up from her work.

“My stars!” continued Neevey. “That was a long time ago!”

"I dunno's it was so very long," was Clarissa's indignant retort. "We ain't none of us as young as we was then. You was married to Dabney quite a spell before Spence got me."

"We was married thirty-two years ago, come next October, the ninth," said Neevey, promptly.

"Is that all?" rejoined Clarissa, with a certain gleam in her small eyes. "Dabney was sayin' to Spence yesterday he believed he'd been married forty years, or a little better. Reckon it seemed so to him."

A tap at the door opening on the porch interrupted this little tilt.

"Why, Lena Klumm!" cried Nona, in a tone of welcome. "Come right in. Take your hat an' cloak off. Here's a chair."

Lena was a large woman of middle age, with yellow hair, big red arms which gleamed through her thin white waist as if they would set the sleeves afire, and a long face, with a determined jaw.

She took off a hat like a black pancake, and a brocaded silk cape of archaic pattern. Then, as she unwrapped a paper parcel she had brought, she said — rather indistinctly, for she had three pins from the package in her mouth:

"I hadn't no invite to this meetin', but I heard

at the store, as ever'body in town was expected to come. There's to be doin's to-night, too, ain't they? "

" Yes. The men folks an' everybody is comin', and there'll be speakin' an' singin'. I'm going to recite," Nona informed her.

" I s'pose you'll let Titus come to-night, Lena? " grinned Clarissa.

Lena Klumm looked coquettish.

" Oh, g'long, Clarissa! " she exclaimed. " How could I keep him away if he wants to come? Who said they was anythin' between Titus an' I? I hope to goodness they ain't no idle gossip runnin' round this village, about us, when they ain't no call for it."

" Well, ain't they? " persisted Neevey. " Titus 'lowed to me the other day as he might want to use some o' the silk gowns an' jew'lry Martha left behind her. I knowed then what was likely to happen, an' I s'picioned who he had his eye on, for his second. You know, Lena, whether my guess was correct. Anyhow, if you want a hope box, it don't need no prophet out o' Judah to tell me why. You ought to make Tite give you one."

" Well, of course," gurgled Lena, trying to blush. " Titus could cut down one o' them cedars in his

wood-lot an' make a box for me that'd be jest what I want. But — Lordy! — I wouldn't ask him. People is talkin' enough, as it is. As I said to Titus last night —"

A general giggle caused Lena Klumm to break off her speech, and for the next hour everybody worked hard, with only an occasional remark on indifferent topics to vary the monotony.

"Well, it's close on half-past five," announced Nona at last. "We'll have the men folks here before we know it."

The hope box gathering broke up, and the visitors all hurried away, to primp for the evening, while Nona and her mother busied themselves getting the house ready.

As Nona had predicted, the men came early for supper. A few had had a hasty snack at home, while getting into their Sunday clothes — after the usual sluice in the tin washbowl outside the kitchen door — but the majority had taken time only to wash, change and drive to the Haynes'. A constant stream of buggies, runabouts, surreys, buckboards, democrats and big box wagons rolled up to the front gate, dropped the women and children, and hurried around to the church sheds, where the horses, still in the shafts, were blanketed and tied in long rows.

At the house Benny Zepp and several other urchins, including Gabe Showell, Eph Conklin and Van Cuddeback, kept watchful eyes on the preparations for supper. All were members of the angel boy-choir of the New Canaan Episcopal Church, now an established institution.

Fluttering about, in white starched frocks, was a bevy of girls ranging in age from five to thirteen or fourteen. Most of them wore corkscrew ringlets, with a large bow of ribbon over one ear, and altogether they were too "touch-me-not" charming for the boys to take liberties with — at first. Later, when the grown-ups were not looking, there came a constant hubbub of girlish squeals, mingled with boyish snickerings, which told of bashful advances and coy repulses.

By seven o'clock, when everybody had arrived, the committee of ladies in charge of supper was in full swing.

To each guest was handed a paper napkin and plate, with knife, fork and spoon. These were followed by offerings of scalloped potatoes, cookies, sandwiches, cake, pie, jelly, pickles and so forth, immediately supplemented by cups of hot coffee. By some mysterious juggling skill, acquired through much practice at pass-around functions, nobody

spilled anything, and everybody had a loose hand when another slice of cake or pie or more sandwiches came along.

“Make long arms, ev’ybody!” exclaimed Neevey, passing refreshments. “The Lord helps them that help themselves, an’ them that’s backward about comin’ forward, now, ain’t got no call to kick, later, if they ain’t well foddered up.”

Most of the company was crowded together in long lines along the walls of two large rooms that had been thrown into one, while stray individuals, couples or groups overflowed to the hall, the porch, the kitchen and two bedrooms. Boys and girls were everywhere.

There sounded a constant buzz of conversation, with laughter and good humor so general that old Mrs. Cabot, deaf as a grindstone, cackled sympathetically from time to time, without knowing at all what had been said.

Dabney Todd was in high feather. He told stories of his boyhood and the pranks he and his comrades used to play, until Neevey warned him that he was saying things which might put mischief into the heads of some of the young people present.

“Shucks!” he replied. “No fear. Boys nowadays ain’t got the sperit we had. An’, of course,”

he added solemnly, as he noticed Benny Zepp and Gabe Showell listening with lively interest, "it 's a good thing they ain't. Say, Neevey, what's that there plate bein' handed 'round for? It ain't got nothin' in it as I see."

"It soon will have something in it," she told him. "You'll put in fifty cents, for your supper and mine. You didn't think we was gittin' it for nothin', did you? The money goes to the Ladies' Aid."

After the collection, which took some little time, Nona Haynes rapped on the table with her knuckles.

"Silence, please! Mrs. Clarissa Howe will read a poem."

"Gee!" whispered Benny Zepp to Gabe Showell. "Let's beat it. Where's the other fellers?"

A subdued scuffling accompanied the retreat of the young gentlemen by way of the back door, while the ladies of their own age — all very prim, with hands in laps, and feet crossed — stared hard and soulfully at Mrs. Howe.

The adult portion of the company had disposed itself to listen, most of the men leaning angularly against walls and door-casings, while their wives settled down in their chairs, handkerchiefs ready to hide a yawn. They had heard Clarissa read before.

“H’m!” coughed Clarissa. “This poem is called ‘The Journey of a Wandering Soul.’ It was written by a lady missionary to Thibet, just before she left her home in Salem, Massachusetts. I cut the verses out of a Boston paper.”

Clarissa hemmed twice more. Then, holding up a long newspaper clipping which give direful promise of some twelve or fifteen verses, she began, in a nasal sing-song:

“My soul, who hath, in mists of thought,
Tried happiness to gain,
How vainly hath thou solace sought,
And surcease from thy pain!

Oh heart, which dost to higher spheres,
Soar up on downy wing,
Sad are the memories which years
Of baffled yearnings bring!”

The other thirteen verses were of the same type, and when they had all been reeled off, with almost as much expression as the grind of a moving picture machine, the sudden stoppage of the drone woke Dabney with a start.

“Fine!” he exclaimed, mechanically. “Awful good, Clarissa!”

Clarissa's hard face cracked into a gratified smile, while Tite Showell whispered in Dabney's ear:

"Say, where the Sam Hill did she find them there verses? Why, blame my cats; there must h' been nigh twenty-five on 'em, an' not a bit o' sense in the hull thing."

"Shet up, Tite!" whispered Dabney. "Spence Howe is a warden of the church, an' I'd like to know if his wife can't speak a piece o' po'try for the benefit o' the Ladies' Aid, without you cuttin' up about it? I think they're goin' to make you an' Lena sing a duet next."

"Git out!" snickered Tite. "They ain't no sech thing. Lena an' me sometimes sings together when we's alone. But we ain't no concert folks, no more'n what *you* be!"

Lije Conklin, very stiff in a shiny broadcloth coat that he called a "Prince Albert," with gray trousers, a celluloid collar and blue tie, gave "Paul Revere's Ride," in a foghorn voice that carried clear out to the state road. He was followed by Myrtle Lewis, with "Barbara Frietchie," and then the phonograph came into action.

The machine had been borrowed from Link Watkins, who had acquired it from one of his customers who could not pay his bill in any other way. It

was an old-timer, which wheezed and sighed a great deal, but there was no mistaking the tunes when it gave forth brassily, "Silver Threads Among the Gold," "Grandfather's Clock," and "Sweet Belle Mahone."

The phonograph helped out two or three times during the evening. As the company tired of recitations, Link turned on the machine for another breathing spell.

When the program was nearing an end, Link held up his hand for attention.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "we come to the real treat of the evenin'. I beg to say that Miss Hazel Devine will read to you a paper entitled 'The New Dawn.' "

Link did not seem to note the lack of enthusiasm his announcement had made.

"Miss Devine has, at a great sacrifice to herself, spent several weeks writin' this paper, an' she asks me to say that she'll need your undivided attention — an' no noise."

Link sat down. The announcement had been quite an effort for him.

Hazel made her way to the center of the room, and, after aweing the assemblage into silence, began:

"We are gathered here to-night, in the sanctity of our home, in the midst of plenty, and it seems to me the occasion furnishes a suitable moment for us to turn our thoughts to the newer life, to the development of our realization that we are One with the All and that there is no Evil save as we ourselves admit it. I call upon you to follow me to the higher planes of intelligence and the loftier regions of existence we are destined to fill, as it were, and I shall attempt to lead you in that direction."

Hazel's attempt was courageous and patient. On and on, she wound herself about the "stars and orbits of the higher world," until, as Neevey said afterward, she was so high up she was afraid to look down for fear of getting seasick.

Gradually the audience thinned. It was very warm in the house, and many of the men slipped out onto the porch, or strolled about the lawn, talking crops, with a side-light on politics, while the ladies who were fortunate enough to be in the other room discussed under their breath the sickness in and about the village, Mrs. Muller's rheumatism, the whooping-cough in the Morrison family, and how the Pollock boy had been rushed off to Redburn to be operated on for appendicitis.

The other luckless ones, Neevey among them, were left marooned in an ocean of new thought.

Through it all Hazel went on steadily, until, at half-past ten, sheer exhaustion brought the torture to an end. Then the company began to think of breaking up, and Blake, who had inveigled Nance into coming, requested her to stand up and lead them in singing "Auld Lang Syne."

Meanwhile, half a dozen boys could have been seen cautiously stealing quietly away from the church barns.

"Where's Benny Zepp an' them other boys, Tite?" asked Dabney Todd, as the song was finished. "I don't see your boy, Gabe, neither, nor Van Cuddeback, nor —"

"I dunno," replied Tite. "Why, yes. There they be! Hey, Gabe! Where you been?"

"Nowheres, dad!" lied Gabe, innocently. "I been here most o' the time."

Benny Zepp said nothing, but there was a strange look in his and the other boys' eyes, as if they had some weighty secret among them.

A great bustle filled the bedrooms where the outer garments and hats had been left. The chirp of farewells mingled with the giggles of girls and the chuckles of some of the young men who wanted to

get in a few words before going over to the church barns for the horses.

Suddenly a roar of dismay came echoing down the road from the darkness. Benny and his friends slipped out of the back door and were swallowed up in the gloom, with a celerity which might perhaps have given rise to some suspicions that they were more or less connected with the cause of the disturbance.

"What in 'nation's *that?*" exclaimed Dabney. "Somethin' wrong over to the barns, from the sound of it."

"It sure is," assented Lije Conklin. "Ole Mart Doover is cussin' like sin! An' Paul Cuddeback!"

"An' Joe Bunt, an' Matthias Rossiter, an' Jim Spafford, an' Dan Kelly," added Amos Todd, going out to the porch with his father. "'Most everybody as was here to-night is j'inin' in. It must be the hosses. I'll go over an' see, dad."

"So will I," declared Dabney. "Bring yer lantern, Amos!"

CHAPTER XVIII

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

THE horse barns belonging to the church consisted of two long sheds, open at the front, but partitioned into stalls. The stalls themselves were deep enough for the horses to draw their vehicles so far in that they would be out of the weather.

The twenty stalls were all occupied, this night, and several teams were tied up to the board fence at the end of the sheds. There was no light except from the flash of lanterns bobbing about here and there.

"What's the trouble, Mart?" asked Dabney, as with Chet, Amos and Lije Conklin, he came up to the barns. "What's bitin' all you men?"

"It's them cussed boys!" barked Paul Cuddeback.

"What they done?"

"Done? Wa'al, if ever I git a holt on any of

'em, I'll fix 'em so's they won't never do it ag'in," snorted Doover.

"I'll skin 'em alive! That's what I'll do!" was the mild threat of Matthias Rossiter.

"Oh, shucks! That's all right!" shouted Dabney Todd, impatiently. "But what the blazes have they *done*? What ye takin' the harness off y'r hoss for, Dan?"

Dan Kelly, red-faced and burly, pushed his democrat back, after unhooking the tugs and unbuckling the holdbacks, so that his horse stood clear. In one hand he held an assortment of muddled straps, with a saddle that seemed to be coming apart.

Dabney stepped closer, and threw the light of his lantern on the horse and the things in Dan's hand. As he shook his head gravely, he remarked, in a puzzled tone:

"That there harness o' your'n don't seem to fit! The headpiece is a sight too small for that mare, an' you ain't got her bitted, nuther. No wonder the rest of the harness slipped off. I never see such a 'tarnal mess in all my born days. What's the matter with it all, anyhow?"

"Matter?" roared Dan Kelly. "Hell's bells! Can't you *see* what's the matter?"

"By guffey!" ejaculated Tite Showell. "It looks

to me as if some mischee-vious folks has been tamperin' with the hosses."

"Tamperin'?" shrieked Kelly angrily. "They've changed the harness on every hoss in the barns! It ain't only mine! The wrong harness is on 'em all! It's a mix-up as it'll take all night to straighten out. *That's* what's wrong. An' it's some o' them damned infernal boys as done it!"

Lije Conklin peered about with his lantern, in and out of the sheds, and behind them.

"Where are the boys?" he demanded. "They was in the house jest now."

"Yes, for about a minute," said Dabney. "But before that they was away for nigh two hours. I was wonderin' they wasn't in the house listenin' to the phonygraf. It must have took 'em all that time to make this pickle."

Amos had been poking about among the horses. He came up and remarked:

"They've put that saddle off Joe Brunt's little sorrel on Tite Showell's big bay mare. It's a wonder the mare didn't kick the mischief out of 'em. She's a blamed ugly critter when she ain't handled jest so. I've shod her often enough to know that."

"She's been kickin' all right," grumbled Tite, as he took the saddle off. "She's bruk the whiffletree

to flinders, an' they's a hole in the dash you could crawl through. It wouldn't have s'prised me to find the hull blame buggy smashed into junk."

"What's it all about, Tite?"

It was the languishing Lena Klumm who asked this, in a sympathetic tone. "Your mare ain't hurt, is she?"

"Not so very much, Lena," replied Titus, trying to make his voice tender. "I'll git you home all right."

"I know you will, Titus!" she answered, softly, giving him a smile, in the light of the lantern, that drove away his anger. "I guess you'll fix whatever the trouble is. You always can."

"Mush!" muttered Neevey, below her breath. Then, to her husband, in peremptory accents: "Will you tell me an' the other ladies here what all this touse is about? Folks want to git home some time to-night."

"They're goin' to have a fine time doin' it," rasped Dabney. "Them boys — onregenerate little Husians! — has been an' lifted all the harness off'n the hosses where it belongs, an' put it on others, and they ain't nobody goin' to git home till daylight, from the looks o' things."

"That's what," agreed Lije Conklin.

“Why,” went on Dabney, “they’ve even separated each harness, so that some of it’s on one hoss an’ some on another, an’ not a blamed strap will fit anywhere! I been used to harness ever sence I was knee-high to a cricket, but I swan to man I never see the like o’ this. It’s the beatinest thing ever I laid eyes on!”

“An’ they’ve went an’ took off the buckles an’ snappers from some on ’em, jest to be the more aggravatin’,” growled Paul Cuddeback, as he discovered fresh troubles. “Well, if that boy of mine’s in this, you can bet he’ll be sorry afore I git through with him.”

“If the boys did it at all, your boy Van was in it,” remarked Titus. “They was all together, tonight. Shouldn’t wonder if Van was the leader in all this.”

“Oh, I dunno!” retorted Paul, quick to defend his boy from outside attack. “I reckon your Gabe was jest as bad!”

Spencer Howe, who had come up a little behind the others, and had just found his rig, interrupted the controversy by howling, frantically:

“Say! Look a’ this, will yer? Here’s a pair o’ hames a-straddlin’ my bay colt, right across his neck! Why, this colt won’t be worth a whoop in —”

“Spencer!” warned Clarissa Howe, in an awful voice, stepping toward him. “What was you goin’ to say?”

“When?” snapped Spencer, defiantly.

“Then! An’ you a warden in the church! Spencer Washington Lafayette Howe, you was goin’ to swear! You know you was! Don’t deny it, Spencer! It makes me shudder.”

“You shouldn’t have let him stand out here in the open shed, deacon,” remonstrated Dabney. “I wouldn’t leave no val’able hoss o’ mine out of a locked stable all evenin’—that is, not one worth as much as your colt. It was takin’ a chance. You got to admit that. Anyway he ain’t hurt none.”

“Wouldn’t have been no chance about it if we wasn’t pestered with the worst set o’ boys this side o’ Gomorrah,” rejoined the deacon. “But I’m gol-dinged if I’m goin’ to stand for it. I’ll write to the distric’ attorney this very night, an’—”

“No, don’t write to-night, Spence,” broke in Dabney, with a dry smile. “Not to-night.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” replied Dabney, “there’s a true sayin’ that you should never write a letter when you’re mad, glad or drunk.”

“Wa’al, I ain’t drunk,” retorted Spence, “an’ I

need to be mad to git into the letter jest what I want to say. Why, that colt —”

“Listen to me, Spencer Howe,” interposed Clarissa. “You jest find the harness belongin’ to you, an’ take me home. I got to bake in the mornin.’ My sponge is all set, an’ I ain’t goin’ to have no sour batch o’ bread on account o’ your old colt. I’m goin’ to git up at five, no matter what you aim to do, an’ I reckon I have a right to *some* sleep.”

By this time everybody had set to work to sort out the harness. It proved a long, tiresome task, rendered the more difficult because there was no light save the fitful gleams from lanterns carried from one rig to another. The horses were restive, too. They had been standing for hours in the sheds, or outside; and moreover, had been disturbed by the boys, when, with hurried, bungling fingers, they changed the harness.

The bustle now, at an hour when their infallible horse sense told them they should have been comfortable in their warm stables, added to their irritation.

It was past midnight before everything had been adjusted. Even then, some of the pieces of harness had not been found, and more than one indignant owner was obliged to twist a wire where there

should have been a buckle, and to substitute rope for a leather strap.

One by one, however, the various vehicles drove away, until only one was left. This was the democrat belonging to the Zepp family. In it were seated Mrs. Zepp and her daughter, Lizzie, while gruff Peter Zepp looked angrily about for his missing son, Benny.

"Where in tarnation is that dod-ratted boy?" stormed Peter. "I ain't seen him all through this fuss."

"Of course you ain't," said Dabney Todd, with a shrug. "He knowed better'n to show hisself while we was gittin' things straight. He an' the others in this have all kep' out o' sight, nat'rally. I reckon Benny's went home."

"Yes, I guess that's right," assented Peter. "He must of. Where else could he of hypered to, but there?"

"I don't believe it," objected Mrs. Zepp, with a mother's solicitousness. "Benny couldn't huck it all that way — more'n three mile — 'specially in the dark. It's a lonesome road, through the woods part of the way, and Benny always was scarey about goin' into places like that. Look on the other side of the barns again, Peter."

"He ain't there," declared Peter, angrily. "I been all about. Let him walk. You allers make too much of a baby o' that boy, Marthy. I'm goin' to lick him good when I do see him. Reckon he knows that. So maybe he won't be in no hurry to git home."

"Well, let's wait a little while," pleaded the mother.

"No, I ain't goin' to wait another minute! He can huck it!"

With an obstinate shake of the head, Peter climbed to the driver's seat, by the side of his wife, and shook the lines. Then, with a short "Good-night, everybody!" he drove down to the road, carefully picking his way by the light of the lantern swinging under the wagon.

He had reached the outskirts of the village, preparatory to climbing the long hill which would take him through the woods referred to by Mrs. Zepp, when a shadowy figure crept from behind a tree and ran to the rear of the democrat.

It was Benny Zepp!

With a light spring, the boy vaulted over the low tailboard, and lay in the bottom of the wagon. Here he snuggled against his sister, who occupied a seat behind her father and mother.

"Oh, Benny!"

The girl repressed a cry with difficulty, as she placed a hand reassuringly on her brother's shoulder.

"Hush! Lizzie! Don't say nothin'!" whispered Ben.

The boy knew he could depend on his sister to help him out of a scrape. By the time the rig turned into the Zepp farmyard he was fast asleep.

When the Zepps had driven away, Dabney Todd and Neevey walked slowly homeward. There was silence between them until they had almost reached their gate. Both were thinking. Suddenly, Neevey turned to her husband and remarked, softly:

"Dabby, you was sayin' to-night, when you was talkin' about what awful rips boys used to be when you were young, that boys in these here days don't git into mischief like you used to. You said they hadn't got no sperit, an' that sperit was a good thing. What do you think of our New Canaan boys now?"

For a few moments Dabney did not reply. When he did speak, it was in a tone that to Neevey seemed regretful:

"Mebbe I was wrong after all, Neevey. Mebbe I misjedge and underestimated 'em, same as all old folks always does young 'uns. By the pink-toed

prophet, they certainly put over a good one, to-night! I wonder how it was us boys forty-five years ago never thought o' this here changin' the harness business? "

CHAPTER XIX

THE WAY OF THE STRONG

THE fortnight that Chet Todd was away from New Canaan, and in the city, interviewing automobile manufacturers, was a time of wonderment and stimulus to him. Though this trip was his first taste of the outside world, yet, thanks to his acquaintance with Nance and Blake, the boy was able to get some perspective, not only of himself, but of the village he had left.

The men he met were aggressive, and yet had an ease of manner that filled him with great desire to make himself as they were. He thought of Nance and the directness with which these men would have ridden over the barriers that kept him away from her. His clothes too came in for criticism. He could see they smacked of the country. They were not alert, businesslike-looking clothes.

The prosperity of the men he talked to impressed him. Cross-examining himself, he realized their look of prosperity claimed his respect, even

before their intrinsic worth held him. In that moment one of his father's oft-repeated maxims came back to him, that "Nothing succeeds like success." Chet knew now what that meant, and the Chet Todd who came back to New Canaan had little of the appearance of the one who had left.

Snuggling in his pockets were the contracts he had made. He was now the authorized agent of the Gideon Motor Car Company and two others equally well-known.

The hours he had spent coming home had found him determined to see Nance and do away with all the pretense that had existed between them since the night she had ridden away with Larry Shayne.

It was Thursday evening when he reached home. His father was at the shop; his mother, away. Throwing his bag into the hall, he made off for Nance's house, determined to act before his decision could slip away.

The Pelot house was dark in front, but Chet detected a light from the back.

Without hesitation he strode to the rear of the house, and through the unshadowed window stared into the kitchen.

A muttered oath escaped him.

Sitting at the table were Joe Pelot and young Mar-

tin Doover. Joe was not exactly drunk, but his loose jaw, bleary eyes and trembling hands told that he was half seas over. He was listening, with a stupid effort at concentration, to something that Martin was saying in low, earnest tones. In his gnarled hand he held a sheaf of bank-bills.

"You know, Joe," were the first words of Doover's that came to Chet's ears, "you ain't been treated right."

"I know it," returned Joe, in maudlin self-pity. "No one gives me a square deal."

"Sure! But you got friends that's goin' to stand by you. They know you're havin' a hard time. That's why they've sent me with this money. There's five hundred dollars in this wad an' it'll put you right on your feet. You'll soon be able to pay it back."

"I see. It's a loan, is it?"

"That's it. Look at these bills! Ain't they the real thing? Eh?"

Joe Pelot reached out to take the money, but Doover drew back, with a grin.

"Hold on, Joe. There's somethin' else. These friends o' mine are goin' to help you, but, jest as a matter o' form, you can sign this paper. It don't amount to nothin'—jest sayin' you owe the money.

Of course, if you never could pay it, no one could make you. But you can sign this, so they'll know I give you the money. Get that?"

"Sure!" agreed Joe, his covetous eyes on the bills — a sum larger than he had possessed since his young and prosperous days. "Where's the paper?"

"Here!"

There was pen and ink on the table. Chet had no doubt these had been placed there, ready, by Doover. Mart put the pen in the old man's palsied fingers.

Then, leaning eagerly over the table, he watched and waited for the signature with a fever of eagerness which — had old Joe been in his right senses — surely must have convinced him arose from more than mere friendship and the desire to help him.

Joe scrawled his name at the bottom of the paper, and at the same time Doover placed the money in his hand. ●

Then something snapped in Chet. Here was something that needed his attention; something that could be handled in only one way. This man was using old Joe to strike down the girl he loved. Chet remembered other days when Martin had spoken slightingly of Nance, and he knew the time had come

to settle old scores and prevent this new outrage.

He looked at his fists, half-seen, there in the dark, and thought of the promise he had made that night in the back pasture.

The time had come.

Silently he made his way to the door. Quickly swinging it open, he jumped into the room. The suddenness of his entrance sent Martin reeling backward.

But Joe looked at him unseeingly. The bills slipping through his fingers, he staggered to the other side of the room, muttering to himself as he dropped into a chair.

Martin, insane with rage, drooling at the mouth, glared at Chet, until the whites of his eyes became red. The boy, already in his shirtsleeves, held him at bay.

Through gritting teeth he had his say.

"Once before, Mart Doover, you ran," he cried. "This time you stay."

He locked the door and flung down the key.

"Now give me that paper!" cried he, commandingly.

Instead, Doover made a jump for the door, thrusting the paper into his coat-pocket.

Chet had overheard enough at home to under-

stand Nance was being pressed to sell her farm. He felt certain the paper that the wretched Joe had signed was in some way connected with this deal, and his devotion to Nance surged up in his bosom in a maelstrom of hate against those who would defraud her.

As Doover reached the door, he was twisted round and flung, for the moment helpless, spinning across to the opposite wall.

He recovered himself. Lowering his head like a charging bull, his coarse features working convulsively, and his big fists swinging, he came forward a step, his red-rimmed eyes fixed on Chet's stony face.

"Give me that paper!" repeated Chet. "I'm most certainly going to kill you if you don't!"

The only answer was a foul curse.

Chet's fist, hardened by years of toil at the forge, and with the urge of constantly used, toughened muscles behind it, struck him in the jaw, and again hurled Martin reeling back.

"Damn you!" spat Doover. "You started this, an' by God I'm goin' to finish it!" Roaring with hate and rage, he leaped, to "rush" the boy and annihilate him.

Chet parried the attack, but could not keep Doo-

ver from getting a grip on him. Panting, tugging, round and round the room they swayed.

Chet lunged after Doover, to strike again. But Martin sank to his knees, so that the blow passed over his shoulder. Then, leaping up, he flung his gorilla-like arms around the boy and lifted him from his feet.

Down they went to the floor, rolling over and over, each struggling to get a grip which would down his foe, with neither successful.

Chairs were sent hurtling across the room, hampering the fighters.

Chet availed himself of a slight relaxation of Martin's grip, as a chair got in his way, and gained his feet. He rushed Martin. For a few moments they waled in murderous blows.

Blood was now freely flowing from Martin's mouth. There was an ugly bruise over Chet's right eye. Their clothes were disheveled; the sound of their panting breaths filled the air.

They broke away from each other, to breathe; and, as they circled like fighting dogs, watched for an opening.

Martin rushed. Playing his favorite trick again, he stooped to avoid the right and left swings Chet aimed at him. Then, with his arms around the boy's

waist, he lifted him and sent him flying over the table.

As Chet reached the floor, hands first, he turned a complete somersault, which landed him on his back. The table and its contents lay scattered on the floor. Through it all old Joe mumbled and leered with maudlin terror.

Doover's innate brutality evinced itself. He sprang to stamp on Chet's face. Before he could bring down his heavy boot, Chet seized him by the ankle, and down went Doover on his face.

For a moment, victory hung in the balance, for both men were helpless. Then Chet, with a supreme effort, turned his enemy over and leaped to his feet, as Mart, too, scrambled up.

Mart, finding himself unable to overcome the other with bare hands, seized one of the chairs. Swinging it over his head, he aimed a terrific blow. Chet ran in, stooping. The chair whirled over his head. He sent his fist flying up under the protruding jaw of his antagonist.

The blow had not been aimed scientifically, but it went home. And behind it lay a hundred and eighty pounds of clean, powerful bone and sinew. The impact of the boy's fist was annihilating.

With a shudder, a groan, Martin collapsed and

lay quite still. Quiet came back to the little room.

The boy turned his vanquished enemy over, and feeling in his pockets, found the receipt Nance's father had given him.

There it was, as he had feared. Old Joe had signed his name to a promissory note for five hundred dollars, in favor of Larry Shayne, and had given the farm as security.

Chet saw the simplicity of the thing. Either Nance's father would have to pay back the money, a circumstance beyond all possibility, or stand guilty of obtaining money under false pretense — or his daughter would have to sell the farm to settle the claim.

And Martin was to have been witness to the transaction.

The smooth cunning of it drew forth an involuntary sort of admiration for the man who had used the poor fool at his feet so well. And Chet wondered if Shayne and he would ever meet as he and Martin had to-night.

Slowly, as the moments dragged on, the boy made up his mind. Then he picked up the scattered bills and put them back in Martin's pocket. After another pause, he carefully tore up the note bit by bit and watched the scraps smolder and burn in the fire.

As he watched the last little piece twisting and curling itself into a blackened nothing, his blood froze within him; the pounding of his heart shook his big body.

Some one had stepped on to the front porch. Then he heard the front door opening.

He wanted to move, but could not. Inert as though gripped by a nightmare, he stood there motionless, hardly breathing.

He gazed around the disordered room. The chairs were piled up in shattered wreckage, the table was overturned, and a wet, sticky mess was spreading over the floor, where the contents of dishes that had been on the table had fallen. And in one corner crouched old Joe!

Chet's eyes took it all in; then he felt them drawn to the dining room.

In the doorway, speechless and bewildered, stood Nance.

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE GAME

IT was not in Larry Shayne's nature to quit. To have expected that he was through with trying to win Nance and secure her consent to sell the farm would have been folly. Not for any money would he have allowed himself to be made foolish in his father's eyes. He was now more than ever determined to succeed with the girl. The snubs and humiliations she had made him suffer could wait. Once he had her, she should pay for them all. A double desire therefore now possessed him — one for the girl, herself, the other for the vengeance he meant to work upon her, when she should lie helpless in his power.

One direct result of the last stormy scene he had had with her had been his determination to try his skill with her father. He would have preferred the other way, but the girl's stubbornness had told him plainly he was wasting time.

For several days he had brooded over his plans to catch Nance off her guard. To a certainty he could count on her being away from home on regular nights of the week, had he been willing to go to old Joe himself. But he had known he stood outside the law in what he planned proposing, and so had cast around for some one else to do his evil work for him.

Larry had been well enough informed of events in New Canaan to know that Chet Todd was away. Out of bitterness against him, Martin Doover had suggested himself as equally hating the boy, and only too willing to square accounts for the insult Chet had given him.

Larry Shayne held a peculiar fascination for Mart Doover. Shayne's clothes, his spendthrift ways and profligateness appealed to Doover as wholly to be desired; and Larry smiled as he recalled his good-natured tolerance of the uncouth Martin. Now he was about to reap the interest of his acquaintance.

Knowing Martin would come to the Seneca the first time he drove to town, Larry had sat down to await his advent. In due time Martin had come, and Larry had unfolded his plans to him, with the result which Chet's untimely intervention has just shown.

Not overestimating Martin's ability, Larry — back in Redburn, watching Nance — wondered if young Mart had succeeded with Joe. It was Wednesday night, and Nance would not be back in New Canaan until nearly noon the following day.

Larry did not question his accomplice's final success. The strategy of whisky over Joe Pelot was too certain for doubt. But if anything had made him postpone his visit, Larry saw how essential it was that Nance should not return the following morning. It was vital that Joe should have a chance to spend part of his windfall. That once accomplished, Larry knew success was assured.

Before he closed his eyes that night, he had hit upon a plan that laid him open to a little risk.

Early the next morning a telephone message came to the modest little boarding-house where Nance spent the night when in Redburn, requesting the good-natured Mrs. Weatherly to inform Nance, when she arose, that she would be needed that evening at the hotel, and to tell her not to return home.

This would not be apt to excite any suspicions on her part. Some evenings she played for the performance at the "Jewfish's" movie theater; and some, at the Inn. Her usual plan, after having spent a night at Redburn had been to breakfast

and go back home to New Canaan on the morning stage, at ten. Larry knew she could not make the trip back and forth, and be in Redburn again in time to go to work at six in the cabaret of the hotel.

He knew she would not stay at the movie-theater. Vague whispers had of late been circulating that Morris Rosenblatt was in some way connected with a tentacle of the white-slaving business in Redburn, and to Nance the theater was as a pest-house. Also, loathing the Seneca as Larry knew she did, there was little likelihood of her coming before evening. By that time the afternoon stage would have left, and she would probably be unable to get home at all, that night.

He had intended to be on hand at about six, and, when she came, question her arrival and disarm her with the statement that some one had played a practical joke on her.

The whole scheme seemed fool-proof. Larry felt almost positive it would keep the girl away from home and at her boarding-place in Redburn long enough to permit Doover's machinations to go through. He congratulated himself on the rare acumen with which he had arranged the matter.

Staying over for some special event at the hotel

was no strange experience to Nance, so she took the message in a very matter-of-fact manner. Her father was so rapidly getting able to be about, that she had no misgivings concerning him. Also, the extra money was very welcome.

The day passed rapidly for her, and it was a few minutes of six before she arrived at the hotel.

Larry had been nervously waiting an hour for her. Rather unexpectedly, his father had returned from the races at Unionville earlier than had been his wont, and Larry had no intention of letting Nance's presence become known to him, if he could prevent it.

Several times he glanced into the café, where his father and some cronies, in whose car he had returned, sat drinking. He wondered if they ever would finish — and then, with rage, he saw Nance walking in.

He saw her speak to his father, and watched him eyeing her as she removed her hat and coat.

Suddenly, Barney excused himself to his friends, and started over to Nance. The interrogation on his face decided Larry to retreat. He slipped out into the lobby.

“What's the reason of this, Miss Pelot?” Barney inquired.

"Reason?" she replied, questioningly. "Why, you sent for me, didn't you?"

"What for? Do you think I need a piano-player to amuse a lot of waiters? There ain't enough doing around here on a Thursday to pay for the lights. When I want you I'll let you know."

"Why, there must be some mistake, Mr. Shayne. Mrs. Weatherly gave me a telephone message from the hotel, asking me to stay over. I would have gone home on the stage this morning, but for that."

"Who gave you a message?" he thundered. "I ain't been in the place all day. If there's any one givin' orders around here, it's *me!*"

Turning, he bawled out a command for Otto, the 'bus boy, to catch Miss Gillen, the day operator, and bring her to him.

"I'll find out if any one's tryin' to kid me," he declared, angrily.

In a few seconds Miss Gillen came in, and Barney turned on her with a snarl:

"Say, miss, who telephoned Weatherly's board-in'-house this morning, and left a message for Miss Pelot?"

The girl hesitated before replying.

"Oh, there *was* some one, eh?" he bullied. "Who was it?"

"Why — I — don't want to get any one in trouble," she stammered.

"Nix on that stuff! What's that you got there? Your call-sheet? Well, give it to me!" and he grabbed it out of her hand. "I'll save you the trouble of tellin' me. What's the number?"

"Cedar, two-double-four," answered Nance.

Barney ran his finger down the sheet. His face grew ever darker, as rage gained upon him, until he seemed to wear an evil mask — almost as vicious as the coarse, red, sensual face of his satellite, Jewish Rosenblatt, himself.

"Yeh, here it is! House call, huh! Who's chargin' up house calls? Who was it? Come on!"

That last was a rifle-shot, and the girl answered:

"Mr. . . . Shayne, sir."

"*Him?* All right! You go now, and — listen! — if you wanta work for me, you speak up when I ask you somethin'."

Barney was by now so terrified that he shook as with an ague.

"You sit down!" he ordered Nance. "Wait here!"

Sitting there, she could hear him in the bar, shouting for Larry. Soon he came tramping in, the boy at his heels. Nance shuddered as he cursed his son.

"You big hunkie!" he bellowed. "I wanta know why in hell you called this girl up and wished her on to me for a Thursday night!"

Larry, remembering other scenes with his father, only trembled.

"Why, it was a little joke. That's all, dad — just a little joke," he managed to get out.

"Joke!" shrieked the old man. "Joke — makin' a monkey-house out o' my place? I could bust your head in for this!" He made a swing at Larry. "You boob! I'm goin' to give her five dollars an' send her home, an' it'll come out o' you!"

He stripped a bill off his roll and handed it to Nance, who drew away.

"Go on, take it!" he urged. "Get a rig and go home. . . . and don't come back. I've stood this damn foolishness long enough. You're the best piano-player I ever had, and if I had anythin' but a half-baked idiot for a son you'd be all right."

He tucked the bill into Nance's hand, and as he wheeled, fetched Larry a cuff on the face with his open hand that sent him stumbling backward.

All the way into the bar they could hear him cursing, as he made his way there to join his friends, who had been discreet enough to anticipate the trouble in the café.

Nance realized that she was through. Her job was gone. Barney had made up her mind for her. As the meaning of his words dawned on her mind, an involuntary sigh of relief escaped her.

Larry read it aright.

"Well, what're you going to do now?" he sneered.

"Wash dishes and scrub floors, if I have to," she shot back at him. "And when I've scrubbed floors until my back is broken and washed dishes until my hands are raw, I'll think of you and be glad I'm doing what I am. No matter what it is, at any rate I shan't have to come in contact with you, or fight the evil net you're trying to throw over me!"

"Well, git! Go back to your drunken bum of a father, and little I'll care!"

"You —"

She paused, her hands clenched, and stood before him, as determined as his father had been.

"You wouldn't talk to a man that way, you cur! My father has not been drunk in weeks. He is crawling about the house, a half-invalid, while I've been down here, working for him."

The perversity that made Larry a weakling impelled him to be incautious now, that he might see her wince.

"I guess you ain't heard the news, then," he bluffed. "Your old man was rip-roaring drunk last night."

It was a staggering blow. For a minute the girl thought she would faint.

The wolf had shown his fangs. It was plain enough now why he had planned to keep her in town.

Murder was in Nance's mind.

"You . . . *you* . . ."

But the words were strangled in her tears. Sobbing and alone, she found herself on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER XXI

JOURNEY'S END

HOW she endured those long miles in the hack Nance did not know. The interminable ride was an effort that left her weak and exhausted. What she expected to find brought her almost to the verge of panic. Her soul lay sick within her at realization that, after all, her father had not been able to play the part of a man, but had once more fallen back into the mire of his sordid vice.

An aeon of time seemed to elapse before the liveryman dropped her at her door. Quickly she let herself in, and rushed through the house to the kitchen. In the doorway, she stopped cold, the disordered room before her.

Her father mumbling in his chair — a man lying flat on the floor — in the center, Chet Todd, huge and primitive, his shirt torn to shreds, and his face covered with blood! One eye was swollen shut. There he stood staring at her out of the other!

While they peered at each other, in tense silence, the man on the floor slowly struggled up. His eyes went around the room, bewildered. Nance recognized him,—Mart Doover!

Then speech came back to her. Pointing to Martin, she asked, a great comprehension in her eyes:

“He did this?”

“Yes . . .” answered Chet.

He nodded his head slowly.

Coming to him, she took his huge hands in hers. She saw where the skin had been rubbed off the knuckles. His face was cut, as well.

Had there been any doubt in her mind as to the grimness of the battle which had been fought there, the heavy smell of sweat and blood on Chet’s big body must have told her the truth.

The strength in her Nance never had quite realized till then. Compellingly, she forced the boy into a chair, then got her father to his room.

Chet sat there, half dazed, watching Martin and wondering if his punishment had been complete.

Martin raised himself painfully on his elbow, his face working as he spoke to the man there before him.

“You goin’ to hit me ag’in, if I git up?” he asked.
Chet shook his head.

"No. . . . I ain't ever goin' to hit you any more, Mart — because you ain't goin' to be round here, after to-night. You want to get this, 'cause if I see you again, you're goin' to jail. . . . Now, pick up the key and hike! . . . Move!"

Slowly, painfully, he reached out and took the key. His eyes, red-shot and murderous as they blinked at Chet, spoke only too well the vengeance Doover would have taken had he dared or been able. Lamely he dragged himself to the door. When Nance returned to the room he was gone.

Martin Doover was saying good-by to New Canaan.

Carefully the girl bathed Chet's bruised face and swollen eye.

"Oh, Chet," she whispered, "when I think of what you've saved us from —!" Her voice broke, unsteadily.

"There, there, there!" he soothed her. "It was only what any man would ha' done. Don't you go an' git all worked up over it!"

"It was splendid, Chet, glorious, big!" she kept on. "The spirit of knight-errantry isn't dead, yet. It's living, here and now, right here in New Canaan, in you!"

"Sh-h-h-h, Nance!"

She kept a little silence, as she ministered to him; then in a calmer tone, asked:

“You’re all right, Chet? Feeling better, now?”

Chet nodded his head affirmatively. But there came no sound from his lips.

It had been days since he had seen her, and weeks on end since they had been alone together. He was afraid of himself.

Gradually they righted the disordered room. Bending over to replace the articles on the old table, the boy’s heart came into his mouth as he felt the silken touch of her hair on his face.

He wanted to remember the things he had planned to say to her, but they refused to come back. In his heart burned only a savage desire to crush her to him.

She was his woman; he wanted her.

When the kitchen was in order, she questioned the boy and drew from him, reluctantly, his story of how he had come to see her and had ended by finding Martin there — and then of the fight.

She knew, now, that she loved Chet Todd.

Once there came to her eyes even a half-wild determination to take the boy in her arms, to mother and fondle him.

A clock chimed eleven, and Chet made ready to go. Nance stopped him.

"Not that way, Chet! There's something I must say before you go."

He stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"You've never questioned me, Chet," she said, "even since the night you saw me riding away in Larry Shayne's car. You haven't been able to understand why I've gone to Redburn two and three nights a week. Wait!" she warned him, as he went to speak. "You hated Larry Shayne. And you despised the part of me that found pleasure in his company. Yes, you did. Did you expect we could go on meeting each other under those conditions, and that I wouldn't realize it? I want you to tell me why you pretended not to notice what I was doing. Once, before to-night, you were willing to fight for me. Why, then, didn't you try to do something about it? Did you think I should come to you and explain myself?"

The fire glowed back into Chet's eyes, as he listened to her arraignment of him.

"Why, I didn't have any right to question you. Good God, Nance! You don't think I doubted you?"

"No, Chet, I know you didn't! At first I couldn't let you know. You wouldn't have understood. Then, later, when I wanted to tell you, you put your

pride against mine, and left me alone. You say you didn't have the right to question me before. Well, after what has happened to-night, you have! I want you to understand," she went on. "If I have been foolish enough to let my pride stand in the way before, that time has passed."

Though Chet protested, she told him, word for word, the conversation she had had with Larry Shayne the day he had seen her riding away with him, and all the circumstances that had led up to it.

Nance Pelot was proving herself. There glowed a deep gratitude in the boy's heart that she was as he had known she would be.

In the end, when she had told him of the pressure that had been placed on her to sell the farm, and had given him some inkling of what had happened back in Redburn that night, her voice was shaken with emotion.

"But I'll get on, some way," she said, defiantly. "I've just *got* to! And we'll be friends, you and I. I guess I couldn't live without that."

Chet started to speak.

"Please," she entreated, "go now. It's late. And please don't say anything further to-night. I just couldn't bear it, now. But I'll be here for you

to take me to choir rehearsal, Friday evening. Then maybe we'll both have thought things out, a little, and know where we stand. You'll come then, won't you, Chet? "

The boy nodded silent affirmation. A tense moment passed between them, as they stood gazing at each other in a silence more eloquent than any words, before he let go her hand.

Then he started for the kitchen door.

"No, Chet," she murmured. "You came that way — the front door now."

Silently the boy passed out into the night. He knew he 'would have explanations to make himself at home. But as he walked slowly along, they were far away.

CHAPTER XXI

DABNEY HITS THE TRAIL

FOR the last three Sundays, the Rev. Mr. Blake had announced in church that "Shouting Tom" Madison, the outspoken evangelist who had swept like a whirlwind through a dozen cities, leaving thousands of converts in his wake, would preach in Redburn for six weeks. As the opening day drew near it divided public interest with Chet's business.

Like the Athenians of old, the New Canaanites were always glad to hear or tell any new thing. The advent of an evangelist in the neighborhood was, of a truth, more than a nine days' wonder to these simple folk, who never had heard of Madison's own personal motto: "A hundred thousand sinners, five hundred thousand dollars!"

Nance's return to active work in the choir caused some talk. Dabney, quick to notice this, did a great deal to allay it by circulating his opinion that she must have finished her work in Redburn. He also

took good care to let folks see him walking home with Nance. It was easier for him to shape public opinion than it was to explain to Nance his reason for wanting to walk with her. To make it seem more natural, he negotiated for and bought two old wagons from old Joe, that he had no earthly use for.

Martin Doover had left town, and Chet's battered face remained somewhat of a mystery, until Link Watkins expressed his opinion that Chet had been thrown out of one of the cars he had been trying to buy. This raised such a good laugh that the boy let it pass for the truth.

Neevey, however, was not fooled, and as Chet would not explain, she knew Nance Pelot figured in it some way.

Blake smiled to himself as he watched Nance and Chet poring over the same piece of music. Truly, it was a strange world.

The following Sunday the great revival opened in Redburn. Blake, in answer to the evangelist's request to have all the churches of the district closed that day, had notified his people during the week, and had again urged them to go.

Sunday dawned bright and clear. The service was to begin at two o'clock; but several hours be-

fore that, people began to drive in from the outlying villages and farms, in rigs of all patterns, from the glittering two-seated surrey to the humble democrat. A few automobiles, their wheels and radiators powdered with the dust of country roads, were also in evidence.

New Canaan was well represented. Dabney Todd, with Neevey and Amos, were early arrivals.

"Guess you folks is hungry," suggested Neevey, when Dabney had tied up in the hitch-barn. "We'll have some lunch right now, in the wagon."

Without waiting for a response, she produced a bulging basket, the contents of which her husband and son put out of sight with business-like celerity. Neevey's appetite was working well, too.

"Sakes alive! There's Clarissa Howe an' the Deacon jest drivin' in," she exclaimed. "An' there's Blake, with Hazel Devine. I don't see Tite Showell, but I —"

"Tite allers goes to the other hitch-barn in Water Street," explained Dabney. "I seen him jest ahead of us when we come to the foot o' the lake. Link Watkins was with him. They druv into town on the west road. Tite's ole hoss don't go well on the hard brick pavement. We'al, ready to go?"

They walked along the main street, and soon came

in sight of the great wooden structure that had been built especially for the meetings. A crowd already surrounded it, among them a number of New Canaanites. The unpainted front doors were all closed, but people were going in and out of those at the rear, amid a general air of bustling preparation. A great event was at hand, and all the inhabitants for miles around were preparing for an emotional excitement such as rarely offered itself in that quiet community.

"Who's them folks?" asked Neevey, of Blake, who was walking with them. "Choir singers, I reckon?"

"Some of them," replied Blake. "But it takes a lot of men to get the place ready and to run things for the meetin's. I suppose some are ushers. Good mornin', Titus. Glad to see you, Link."

Titus and Link Watkins returned the greetings, and another group from New Canaan, including Paul Cuddeback, Myrtle Lewis and Nona Haynes, passed along, nodding and exchanging a few words with Dabney's party.

A general atmosphere of holiday-making prevailed, and everybody seemed pleased to see everybody else. The only regret was that they would have to wait an hour before the doors would open.

Redburn people were abroad, as well as those from the country. "Shouting Tom" Madison's name was known to everybody in America. He had gained the reputation of hitting straight from the shoulder, and though he might hurt some persons, he was quite likely to bring those same individuals into the fold. He made converts by the hundred, at every meeting, under the psychological stress of mass-stimulus; and though, as always happens, some of them very soon "backslid," still he had built up for himself a tremendous national reputation. So the people of Redburn and all the country round were determined by no means to miss his first service, where they might see for themselves wherein his great persuasive power lay. Patiently, they waited standing outside the temple, or strolling about the sunlighted streets, until they could get in.

When, at one o'clock, the large double doors were flung open, there was a rush. The long line that had been clinging to the wooden walls for hours was swallowed up in a few minutes. Then came the others.

Neevey marched up one of the sawdust aisles to a seat near the front, with Dabney and Amos on either side of her. She saw that the immense platform, with its seats for the choir at the back, and

its reading-desk in the center, was fairly well occupied already. The choir were all in their places. Neevey calculated there must be more than a hundred.

"This here smell of new pine is mighty satisfyin'," remarked Dabney. "I dunno anythin' cleaner. Seems to me it ought to help the preacher to git to the hearts o' folks, 'cause a man as is clean is gen'ally readier to listen to reason than one as ain't."

Blake smiled at this whimsical idea, but didn't contradict it. As for Neevey, she was too much occupied in looking about her to take any notice of what her husband had said.

There was not much opportunity for further conversation, just then. The choir leader — a husky-looking young man, with a dominating voice — faced the choir, both arms upraised. Then he brought them down with a sweep. The singers broke out into a lusty chorus that rang among the rafters, and, embracing the now large assemblage, compelled them to take part in the great, swelling harmony.

The building was nearly full. In a few moments the doors must be closed on throngs outside, waiting to get in. No one could help being inspired by the

music, and when the thousands of voices joined in, the effect was electrical.

Suddenly the music ceased, and a stockily-built middle-aged man, with keen eyes, a humorous mouth and a decided manner, stepped to the front of the platform. It was "Shouting Tom" Madison! Without any prelude he said, in a deep, resonant voice:

"We'll sing the Doxology."

The response was hearty, and, as the last strains died away, he offered a prayer, and then began his address.

"Shouting Tom" did not spare anybody, and his words could rightly be described as burning. The first thing he said gave the whole vast audience a shock.

"It is a wonder that God gives you any chance of heaven, when he looks over the gang on this earth."

"Land sakes, Dabby!" murmured Neevey. "He looked straight at us when he said that."

"I don't think he meant me," returned Dabney, in a whisper. "Who's sitting behind us? By jings, it's Spencer Howe! Wow! That was pretty tough on the deacon."

It seemed as if Madison really did mean Spencer, for his next sentence was:

“There’s a whole lot of you deacons who don’t ‘deac.’ Wake up, you fellows, and dig for Christ a little harder. You’d be better for it, and so would others in the church.

“I don’t say all you people who go to church on Sunday and put your dimes in the collection plate are hypocrites. But I’d think more of some of you if you didn’t pose as Christians when your hearts aren’t in it. And also if, when you can easily spare a dollar, you wouldn’t spend it on autos or travel or worldly books or pleasures, but would give it to the work of salvation, instead of the measley little dime or quarter you drop in!” Then he added, pointing a finger at the other side of the place: “Yes, I mean you — and you — and you! If you don’t like what I say, come out like real men and women, and tell me you’ll do better.”

By this time the speaker was warmed up. His powerful arms swung, as, with clenched fists, he drove home his sentences.

“Don’t be too sure,” he cried, “that you are bound direct for eternal torment or everlasting happiness. There are some people who think they are on the way to hell when they are so close to heaven they can almost hear the angels sing. And there are some so near hell they can almost smell the

sulphur fumes. But, whether you are a Christian or not, you must all be present on the judgment day."

Neevey had been looking at Link Watkins, in a seat near the front, fumbling about in his pockets, as if searching for something. The keen eyes of Tom Madison detected a little inattention in Link's neighborhood, caused by the old man's maneuvers. Stopping short in his sermon, Madison pointed directly at Link and demanded:

"What's the matter? Lost your specs? Look about the house when you get home, and you'll find them in the family bible, where you left them six months ago, the last time you had it open. It's a better book than any that preaches up-to-date nonsense and all this modern science heresy; that tries to prove the damnable doctrine of evolution and make man only a part of the universe, instead of its crowning achievement that all the rest of infinitude was created to serve and bow before! Look out, you dabblers in the sin of science!"

There came a burst of laughter at this apt accusation, for Link Watkins was well-known to have leanings toward modern scientific thought, and was suspected of even having gone so far as to read Darwin's "Origin of Species." Neevey saw that the old store-keeper's ears were flaming.

The evangelist shouted on and on. In rapid succession he trained his shrapnel shells on the liquor question; and though there was a coarse brutality in his words, the fire of the man himself and his mad enthusiasm robbed them of their offensiveness, and left them living things that went straight to the mark.

"God never questions penitents," he thundered. "If you were a drunkard, He'll forgive you. He doesn't care what you have been or what you have done, if you only stick to the old doctrines and repent."

Then denunciations gave way to pleadings, and he stretched forth his hands, as he asked, piteously:

"Won't you come forward and take my hand, in token that you are willing to be saved? Don't be ashamed. The Man, Christ, was not ashamed of you when He gave His life for you on Calvary. Who'll be the first?"

No one stirred. The spell of that vast multitude held them.

"Don't be too proud to walk up here and say you're sorry. Don't let the sneers of some God-forsaken gang you have been training with hold you back now. 'Come to me!'" he apostrophized.

And he held his hands out invitingly to the enthralled audience.

“Hit the trail, if you want salvation! And remember that if you hold back because you fear the sneers of your friends in this life, they will give you the horse laugh in hell, because you were foolish enough to listen to them here in Redburn today. In hell, brethren — in the real, material, blazing place of eternal fire and brimstone torments without end that an outraged God has prepared for all who insult Him by refusing to believe His word!”

They were not holding back now. The aisles were filled with terrified people eager to grasp the evangelist's hand and declare anew their faith in God. It seemed that there would be no end to the struggling, hysterical line that surged toward the platform.

“Say, I can't stand this,” said Deacon Howe, in Dabney's ear. “I'm goin' up.”

“That's what he'd oughta do,” whispered Neevey to Dabney. “I've a good mind to go, myself.”

“Shouting Tom” understood the dramatic values. He turned to the choir director and gave a signal. Instantly a Gospel hymn to a marching tune thundered through the great hall. The words were fa-

miliar, and as the revivalist motioned to the audience to join it, they obeyed with a will.

Dabney, his face glowing like a ruddy winter apple, turned to Amos:

“Amos, I allers been a-sayin’ to myself that some day, when I got a little time, I was goin’ to git my house in order, an’ tell God I was sorry for a lot of the pesky mean things I done to other folks, an’ promise to do better. Now, my boy, if you’re willin’ to walk up there with your ole dad, I want you to come along.”

As they marched up the aisle, Neevey Todd, staring at them from her seat, knew she was the proudest woman in the world.

She watched them until they were halfway toward the platform, when suddenly something familiar about a figure limping his way along the aisle, with the aid of his cane, struck her.

So great was Neevey’s surprise that she almost lost sight of Dabney and Amos in her excitement.

It was old Joe Pelot!

As Neevey watched, she saw a strong man take Joe’s arm in his; and, half supporting him, they went up the trail together.

That man was Blake.

Far back in the upper gallery, a young girl watched

fascinated, even as Neevey and the boy beside her watched, too. There were scalding tears in the girl's eyes — but they were tears of happiness, as she wondered if this strange disciple of God had been sent to crown her faith in her father with success. The boy found his lips dry with emotion. Some vital force that neither one was conscious of drew her hand into his. He, unmindful of all else, pressed it tenderly in his strong grasp.

Nance and Chet, there unknown to the others, knew that the music singing in their souls was sweeter far than any ever sung by mortal choir.

CHAPTER XXIII

SODIUM CHLORIDE

IT was getting well along in November, and Chet's business had begun to drop off, as he had expected it would, during the winter months. He had sold a good number of cars by now, had so enlarged his garage that he had been obliged to hire two men to help him, and was realizing a fine profit from his repair-shop.

The boy had determined that early spring should see him prepared to make good his promise to connect up the nearby towns with a system of automobile stages.

Nance was no longer a stranger, and the two of them had driven countless miles together, during the late days of Indian summer. The countryside, then at its best, was a study in golden browns and rich yellows, save where the juniper bushes or wild buckthorns raised their blood-red leaves.

Several times on these rides they had met Cash — still the same cheerful optimist as ever.

Cash marveled at the change in the boy. His manner and speech, even his appearance, were altered. Cash well knew the girl at Chet's side was feeding and keeping aglow the tiny flame he himself had kindled.

Last week, snow had fallen. Almost every day brought its flurry; and the gray, overcast skies told plainly of the approach of winter.

So, when three gentlemen from Syracuse dropped off the stage in New Canaan and asked to be driven along the lake, it surprised Chet a bit. It was not the kind of weather to send city men touring country roads.

As he brought out his car, he scrutinized the three strangers. Two of them were businesslike-looking men, while the third, a scholarly-appearing fellow, with a rather preoccupied expression in his tired eyes, smacked of the laboratory or classroom.

It did not take long to reach the lake road that branched off to the left, with only one field between it and the water.

"Wait a moment," requested one of the men, leaning forward to touch Chet on the shoulder. "We'll take a look around here."

They were driving past Nance Pelot's farm.

"Rough-looking place!" remarked the man who

had spoken first, as the three got out of the car. "Doesn't look as if anything was ever raised on it. Pretty view, though!"

"Yes," replied Chet. "You can see along the lake for more than ten miles, from here."

The boy's thoughts were busy, as he tried to determine what reason his passengers had for getting out of the car here. He did not believe the view had much to do with it.

"Wait for us here," directed one of the men. "We are going up the hill, so we can see the country better."

They climbed over the tumble-down fence and walked away, while Chet watched them curiously. Reaching the top of the hill, they stood there for a few moments, and then disappeared on the other side.

Two of the strangers were the same men who had talked to Larry Shayne in the Seneca Inn, months past. Both of them deferred to the scholarly-looking man who accompanied them to-day.

Once out of Chet's sight, they turned directly for the lower end of the farm, and once there, gave their attention to certain depressions in the surface, filled with water from marshy springs.

"Well, Van Praag, what do you say?" one of

them asked the little man, who, on his hands and knees, was cautiously tasting and smelling the water as it bubbled out of the ground. "Do you see any indications that we've found what we're looking for, or are we on a wild-goose chase, after all?"

Van Praag stood up and wiped his hands before he replied:

"Vell, vithout some laboratory work, I can't say joost how heavy the solution is. But it's goot brine, that's plain. The incrustations seem to crystallize in cubes. If the crystals ver solid, it might mean halite, but the vay they crumble in the fingers is proove they have been deposited there recently, und have been subjected to rapid evaporation in the air.

"Und, besides," he continued, "the number of springs in this small area, all containing solution of about the same density, vould convince me that the springs have passed through extensive deposits of Silurian salt."

"You mean, Van Praag, you think we have discovered a continuation of the Onondaga series of deposits?"

"I think that's certain," the little man said, ponderingly. "The whole fault of this land shows a similarity to the topography of the surface over the Salina beds."

Brewster, the eldest of the three, turned to his partner.

“ Why, Ed, we’ve made a ten-strike! This property will be worth thousands to us. Once we get a railroad in here, we’ll market it as cheaply as we do in Syracuse.”

“ We told you that right along,” Ed answered — “ Ed ” being no other than G. Edward Haines, president of the Iroquois Salt Company.

“ But how are we going to get it? ” he continued. “ There’s the rub. I’m through with that man Shayne. We can’t change our story to the girl, or she’ll sure get suspicious. I say, let’s go to her ourselves and make her an offer that will stagger her. If that don’t work, we’ll talk leases, if we have to.”

It was more than half an hour before they returned, and then they did not come back the way they had gone, but along a gulley that serpentineed its way through the hollow and finally emptied into the lake.

“ We are looking around to buy a place,” volunteered the man who had done most of the talking. “ This farm might suit us.”

“ I don’t think you could get this farm,” replied Chet, shortly.

“ Why not? ”

“ Because it’s not for sale. Everybody in New Canaan knows the owner has lately refused to part with it.”

“ Maybe she will if the price is high enough. We are willing to pay a reasonable price — more than the owner would be likely to get from anybody else. Well, you can drive us back to the village.”

As they went back, Chet wondered whether this was another move of Larry Shayne’s. That he had ever wanted the place for himself was preposterous. He had perhaps told these men to look at the farm, in person, and had given them to understand that it was only a question of price. If they offered enough, they would get it. Knowing Larry as well as he did, Chet could quite believe he would assure them of that. Larry had always been all things to all men, and had never stinted himself on promises, to gain his ends.

There was no more conversation between the strangers and Chet. He left them at the New Canaan House and returned to the garage.

“ What’s that ’ar little bottle down behind the cushion of the back seat? ” exclaimed one of his helpers. “ Did those men forgit it? ”

“ I guess they did,” Chet replied, as he took the bottle. “ Clean her off good, Jimmy. Put in a

quart of oil, give her some grease an' fill the radiator."

Chet examined the bottle.

It was one of Van Praag's laboratory jars, and was half full of what looked like water. He shook it up. Then he pulled out the rubber cork and smelled the contents. The pungent brine filled his nostrils.

He closed the little glass jar and sat down to think. Beyond a question the contents of this jar had come from Nance Pelot's farm. What did it mean?

For possibly five minutes Chet sat there, deciding where to turn. He knew nothing of chemistry, and was reasonably sure Blake could not help him. Out of the jumble of names running through his mind, he recalled that of Knute Knudsen, over at the big beet-sugar refinery, near Unionville. Knudsen was the chemist of the plant. Chet determined to interview Knudsen at once.

Knudsen was glad to see the boy, and smiled good-naturedly at his excitement, as he took the container into his hands and opened it.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, humorously. "Out of somebody's salt-pork barrel? It's salt — raw brine, with a lot of nitrates of one kind

or another in it. I don't have to go any further to tell you *that!* ”

“ You mean, Knute, it's the brine that commercial salt — table-salt, I mean — is made from? ”

“ Exactly. If you want to wait until I make a hydrochloric acid gas test, I'll show you a slight precipitation even from the little brine you've got.”

This was stupendous!

Chet had heard enough. To Knudsen's importunities as to where he had got it, Chet was deaf.

Driving home, he was in a quandary.

It meant that Nance Pelot was rich, if the wells were of any capacity.

No wonder Larry Shayne had tried so hard to get the farm! Chet laughed long afterward, when he found out that Shayne had been used as a blind in the whole transaction, and got a peculiar satisfaction out of knowing that Larry had gorged the bait without question.

CHAPTER XXIV

JOE PELOT KEEPS HIS WORD

JOE PELOT'S conversion was a nine days' wonder. It left him utterly prostrate. For once in his life he was face to face with himself, and the horror of that night in the kitchen hung over him like a pall.

Deep in his mind was a misty remembrance of the paper he had signed and given to Martin Doover. His poor brain, weakened by long-continued drinking, refused to answer the query: "What was written there?" Try as he would, he could not recall what it had been. He had only a dim recollection of money and a foreboding sense that Martin had persuaded him to sign a receipt of some kind.

Larry Shayne's name, in some way, clung to it. Joe tried to find Martin, but his father told him he had left home. He was in despair and afraid to mention the matter to Nance.

He brooded over it, until, at last, with sudden resolution, he made up his mind to go down to Red-

burn and see Larry Shayne. Larry had that paper, whatever it was. Joe might have some difficulty in getting it, but he would try for it, anyhow. A certain reviving spirit of manhood, reawakened in him now that King Alcohol had moved out and reason had moved in, strengthened him to a resolve that, formerly, would have been an utter impossibility to him.

He borrowed a horse and buggy from Lije Conklin, telling Lije he wanted to go out to the farm. The weather was threatening, and Lije was not keen about risking a horse in it. But he had worked for old Joe a great many years, and couldn't say No to his request.

It was noon when Joe left New Canaan. Lije never suspected that he intended going to Redburn. Clouds were lowering as he drove away, and a few flakes of snow scurried about him, threatening soon to add an inch or two to the already heavy white blankets that covered the landscape. A chill wind whistled in his ears, as he pulled his cloth cap well down, and took the lines in his mittened hands.

"Goin' to be a cold trip, Joe," remarked Lije. "Good thing you ain't goin' fur."

"Cold weather won't hurt me none," was Joe's reply, as he waved Lije a farewell.

By the time he reached the lake road it was snowing hard, and the wind had increased in ferocity. He pushed on with busy thoughts, taking little heed of the storm.

Several hours later, stiffened with cold, and with a sheathing of ice on horse, harness, and buggy, the lap-robe crackling with frozen snow, Joe got down at the Seneca Inn and went inside.

It was some minutes before the warmth of the place thawed him out so that he could speak coherently. Then he asked the bartender for Larry.

"Larry's out of town," replied that individual. "He's gone to Syracuse. You'd better get a drink under your belt, old-timer. You're mighty nigh all in."

"No, I got to refuse you," replied Joe. "Me an' drink ain't speakin'. You don't suppose he'll be back to-day, do yuh?"

"I don't know. If this snow keeps up, he won't get nowheres. What do you want to see him about? His old man's here."

"Nope," Joe said, forlornly. "Barney couldn't do nothin' for me."

"Well, sit down an' wait awhile. The kid may come in on the four o'clock train. You won't have one on me, eh, Joe?"

He had seen Joe Pelot wearing his shoes out on the bar rail for so many summers and winters that it made him laugh to see the battered old wreck picking his way into the hotel office, shaking his head negatively.

The storm had filled the office with a motley crew of men who made their way to the bar and back, at intervals, and Joe's decision began to torture his soul. Lije's horse shivered outside under the robe Joe had thrown over him. The clock seemed to stand still. Joe began to wonder if he could sit there another hour, so close to temptation, and not be overwhelmed by it.

Through it all the storm continued, the wind growing higher, and the snow piling up against doors and windows. With dread the old man listened to the high and rising note of the storm-gale, shrieking round the inn as though all the evil Djinns of Victor Hugo's poem had been borne aloft on its stinging breath.

Several times he hobbled into the bar and stood there, sucking in the breath of the place. It had a bouquet for him, of tempting savor.

Four o'clock came finally, and with infinite torture the moments dragged on, until he knew there was no hope of seeing Larry Shayne that day.

"Guess I got to be gittin' back," he told his friend the bartender. "No use waitin' 'round here any longer."

"You ain't thinkin' of drivin' home in this storm, are you?" the bartender asked incredulously. "You'll never make it!"

"Well, I reckon I can't stay here no longer."

Joe Pelot knew whereof he spoke.

"I ain't goin' to let you go out in that blizzard without a bracer! Here!" . . . and he mixed him a steaming toddy. There was a touch of humanity in this, from the white-aproned man, according to his lights. "Drink her down!"

"No, I'm on the water wagon," insisted old Joe.

But, somehow, his hand came up and rested on the bar, some little distance from the glass, while the fragrant vapor curled into his nostrils, awakening a longing that increased as the moments passed.

By this time Joe's fingers were touching the glass. He could resist no longer. His craving had overcome him.

Next moment he had gulped down half of the still warm mixture; and then he drained the glass.

The fiery liquid burned its way down his throat.

As the bartender watched him, he wondered if the man before him had suddenly gone mad. Joe's eyes

were widening, until they looked insane, and he stared at the empty glass in horror.

With a terrible revulsion of feeling he had all at once realized that he had been unable to keep his sworn, pledged word of honor, even with God!

Slowly the fingers that held the frail glass contracted, until it shivered in a hundred pieces on the floor. Spellbound the bartender watched him pull the heavy mitten over his cut hand; then, before he could prevent, Joe Pelot was outside in his buggy, whipping his horse into the storm.

A few minutes later he was lost in the clutch of the blizzard. Now his horse plodded on at a walk, through the snowdrifts; and again, in places where the wind had scoured the road clean, he galloped.

An hour later, they still were going on. Joe mechanically held to the lines, but the horse plodded along, unguided.

Unseeingly he peered ahead. It began to grow dark. Vaguely he realized that he was lost. Lije's horse, trusting to his equine intuition, kept his head for many miles, but now the storm was overcoming him.

Joe did not know where he was. Nothing could be seen but the driving snow, as night closed in.

The warmth of the liquor had evaporated, and he

had been growing numb for some time. It was not an unpleasant feeling — merely a drowsiness that inclined him to lean back under the buggy-top and doze luxuriously.

The horse stumbled off the road and into a field where the fence was down, and went on and on in aimless patience.

Joe gave way to the increasing drowsiness; and then came sleep.

Back in New Canaan, Lije Conklin was worrying about his horse. Joe Pelot ought to have been back long ago if he had only gone as far as the farm. Lije made up his mind to go and see Nance.

He found Nance as worried over her father's absence as he was.

"No, Lije, he's not here. Why, I didn't even know my father had gone to the farm. Where can he be in all this storm?"

The girl's face was white, and her eyes became unnaturally large with terror. Her father must have met with some accident. Perhaps the horse had stumbled, and Joe had not been able to get him to his feet. Perhaps — no, no! And yet — perhaps?

It was night now. She must get some one to help her find him. She could not ask Lije.

Chet! Yes, he would do it — for her!

He asked her no questions. When she had told him that she feared her father was in the storm somewhere on the road to Redburn, he understood what she meant. Without discussion, with no word of blame for Joe, he bent his energies to the task at hand. Never, thought Nance, had he seemed so masterful, so essential to her very existence, so much a man!

It was not long before he had Diamond, hitched to a light cutter, at her door. Automobiles were useless now.

Tenderly he wrapped her in a heavy blanket. They did not talk. The girl's face was half covered with a woolen shawl, through which she peered into the gloom, as Chet drove doggedly on.

The snow had stopped, and the night was far colder than the afternoon had been. Chet knew it must be nearly zero.

Suddenly the boy pulled up, as he stared into the snowy waste on his right. He had seen something in a fence corner that had awakened his worst fears.

Placing the lines in Nance's hand, he jumped out of the buggy.

She saw him plowing his way through the heavy drifts into the field, making his way to the Some-

thing in the corner. Then she heard him calling:

"Joe! *Joe!*"

No response.

Nance was out of the buggy herself, now, and was stumbling through the snow.

"Is he there, Chet?"

"Yes."

"Not hurt?" she asked in agony. "He's all right, isn't he? Just lost the road, and waiting—"

"Yes, waiting!" interrupted Chet softly. "I'll get another blanket to put around him. Then I'll lead his horse out of the field, and we can take him home. Don't worry."

Nance was already on her way to get the blanket. Tenderly she wrapped it around the insensible form of her father, in the buggy. As Chet led the horse to the road, she got in by her father's side and took the lines.

"I'll drive," she said bravely. "Will you go first?"

Chet led the way in his sleigh, and so the two rigs went back to the village.

With the boy's help, she got her father into bed and ministered to him, until he became conscious enough to recognize her.

"Nance!" he whispered, so faintly that she had to bend low to catch his words. "Nance!"

Doc Rand was there now. He steadied the girl as she spoke.

"Yes, father?" she sobbed.

It was another five minutes before he could speak. The girl wondered if he could go on.

"I . . . come . . . back," he mumbled faintly, "from . . . Redburn . . ."—the words were coming hard—" 'cause . . . I couldn't keep my word . . ."

Nance was limp in Chet's arms.

". . . and I . . . wanted to . . . with . . . Him. . . ."

Doc Rand felt the body relax, and motioned Chet to take the girl away.

Joe Pelot had paid the price. Who shall say that he had not won his reward?

CHAPTER XXV

NEEVEY CHANGES HER MIND

JOE PELOT'S passing brought a new tide in Nance's affairs. Through the years she had believed in her father, when hope had all but deserted her, and he had not failed her in the end. The determination and courage that held forth so defiantly in his daughter had come to the surface in him, at his last hour.

His untimely taking off had made Nance almost forget the news Chet had brought back to her from Unionville. As days passed, and Nance became more reconciled to her father's death, the farm and its future came more and more to occupy her attention.

Brewster had stayed on in New Canaan, and had gone to see her several times.

Through those devious channels by which news circulates and secrets leak out, New Canaan came to understand his mission there. People gazed in awe at Nance and talked of the wealth she would

have, some day. Village-like, each repeating added to the amount she would receive, until it grew to fabulous figures. New Canaan, once suspicious of her in poverty, now began to veer round toward her. Her breaking-off of even the superficial friendship she had seemed to show for young Shayne was also interpreted greatly in her favor. Maybe after all, the village thought, the girl had been misjudged. Here, as everywhere in the world, was being demonstrated the truth of the old adage: "Money talks."

The change of feeling toward Nance became every day more apparent. The townsfolk had regarded her superficially, and, since they had not understood her, had decided against her; she had had to fight the narrow-minded prejudices of a small community by sheer goodness of heart and blamelessness of life. Now, that she was coming forth triumphant from the battle, her worth shone all the more brilliantly because it had been so obscured by undeserved suspicion.

The secrecy which had veiled her movements in Redburn had been torn away, and those who had doubted her knew now that the girl had been working to support her father.

Nance, for her part, was too glad to find them at last on pleasant terms with her, to go deeply into

the causes of their former unfriendliness. She had seen something of the world, and knew human nature. The people of New Canaan were, on the whole, not unlike those of any other community. They followed their leader, as people did everywhere.

For Neevey, Dabney's prophecy had come to pass, and she had an uncomfortable feeling about the prejudices she had felt against Nance, now happily shown to have been unwarranted.

Neevey, true to her word once Nance had proven herself, put her pride behind her, and during the days of the girl's bereavement did all that was in her power to comfort and console her. She now found so much to admire in the girl, that Dabney shyly wondered if whether Neevey, seeing the battle going strongly against her, had not decided to change fronts, determined at any cost to be with the victors. Dabney knew he never would forget the expression on Neevey's face when he told her of his ride with Nance.

Chet, from afar, looked upon his mother's friendliness for the girl with a happy heart.

Neevey had just cleared away the supper-dishes one evening, when Nance entered, her cheeks a-glowing.

“ Good evening, Mrs. Todd,” said she, as Neevey pushed forward a chair for her. “ Is Mr. Todd home? ”

“ What’s happened? ” asked Dabney, kindly, from his chair beside the fire. “ Got four millionaires who all want to marry you, an’ you dunno which one to take? ”

Nance obligingly smiled at Dabney’s sally, as she answered:

“ Not exactly, Mr. Todd. It’s about the farm. The Iroquois Salt Company has offered to lease it for fifty thousand dollars. That’s a great deal of money. To tell you the truth, I can hardly imagine such a sum. Just think! Fifty thousand dollars! Why, it all seems like a dream, to me. I just can’t make myself realize it’s coming to me, *me*, Nance Pelot. I have to keep pinching myself to make sure I’m really and truly awake! ”

Dabney Todd drew a few puffs through his corn-cob, with a serious face.

“ Yes, fifty thousand makes quite a wad, Nance. But you’ll have to get more for that farm. After a while, you’ll get used to fifty thousand, and a million won’t look such a lot to you.”

“ Well, what shall I do, Mr. Todd? I told you I wouldn’t do anything about disposing of the farm

without asking you. It took me a long time to convince them I positively wouldn't sell the place, and now they've made me this wonderful offer."

"It's a sight of money — no denyin' it. But shucks! you ain't goin' to be needin' that all at once. If this here Irokoy Salt Company's willin' to give you fifty thousand dollars for the salt rights, they've went into it far enough to know they can afford it, an' a little to spare. You sign that lease, an' you might jest as well sell the farm. I wouldn't, if I was you. There's lots of outs about that plan. Far as you're concerned, you're through."

"You think the farm is very valuable, don't you, Mr. Todd?"

"Lord alive, yes! Any land folks will offer you fifty thousand dollars for is val'able. What you want to do is to lease it on a fair percentage of what it perduces. Make 'em give you a coöperative contract, that will guarantee you a profit on every ton they take out. Understand me, Nance?"

"Yes."

"An' fix it so you'll get a bonus of four or five thousand 'dollars."

"Five thousand dollars?"

"Cert'nly! You've got to have some ready cash to go on, while they're puttin' in machinery; an' they

won't touch it till they get a railroad in here. Five thousand dollars will carry you along in New Canaan for a little while."

"A *little* while?"

Nance's voice trembled. She could not grasp the immensity of the good fortune that seemed to be actually in her hands.

"There's another thing, Nance," Dabney professed. "Before you sign any such contract, you let me take it down to Redburn. I don't want to git cheated out of the fun o' settin' in a big game like this."

For nearly half an hour Dabney went over the details of the arrangement he advised Nance to make. As he talked, the girl realized more than ever how shrewd and far-seeing was this good-humored, often careless-seeming, elderly man. Living in a small village, he had maintained a steady and broad outlook on life, supplementing the wisdom thus gained by much reading.

Even Neevey, while professing to make light of her husband's business acumen and general knowledge of affairs, glanced at him more than once with pride.

Dabney knew it might be some time before Nance received her money, and that the surest way to close

the deal would be to place her beyond any pressing need.

As Nance rose to leave, he said:

"In the meantime, while you're waitin', I'll auction off for you what little stuff they's left around your paw's shop. It'll bring you in enough to keep you goin' a couple of months or more, an' if you ain't fixed up then, maybe I could be induced to loan you a little money on that farm. I ain't promisin' you nothin', Nance, but if you want to try me an' see, there won't be no harm done."

The last was said with a humorous twinkle in the gray eyes.

Neevey opened the door for Nance, and closed it again when she found it was snowing.

"Can't let you go out that way, Nance. Wait till I git you a wrap."

When she returned it was with her favorite shawl, which she placed around the girl. Nance gazed at it admiringly.

"A real Paisley shawl! I can't take this, Mrs. Todd," she pleaded.

"Now don't you try goin' ag'in me," Neevey retorted. "I can't have you runnin' around barkin' your head off."

Dabney pretended to be busy filling his pipe. But

he did it only so that he could bend his head to hide his gratified smile. He knew now that Neevey had taken Nance Pelot to her heart. The offer of the Paisley shawl had proved that, to the uttermost.

CHAPTER XXVI

DABNEY TODD, AUCTIONEER

SEVERAL days later bills announcing a sale by auction of the tools, forge, and other contents of Joe Pelot's blacksmith shop, appeared in Link Watkins' store and were scattered about the surrounding country.

When the day of the sale arrived, Nance prepared the sandwiches and coffee, which, according to custom, would be served at noon free to all who came. To see that nobody was overlooked, Lena Klumm came early to Nance's home that morning, and the two had everything ready in ample time.

Dabney took charge at the shop, and lighted a fire on the forge himself, so that the place should be comfortable. Benny Zepp was placed at the bellows, and admonished to blow up the fire whenever it seemed to be going down.

"It ought to be easy for you, Benny," said Dabney. "You're used to blowin' the organ bellows,

down to the church, an' this is about the same thing. When the sale's over, I'll give you a quarter."

Benny grinned a freckled and gap-toothed grin, and announced himself well pleased with the terms, even though he was not listed as "Assistant Auctioneer."

There were other things to be sold besides the contents of the blacksmith shop. Several persons in and near New Canaan who had odds and ends to dispose of, not numerous or valuable enough to warrant a separate auction, brought them here, to be knocked down by the auctioneer at the regular percentage. There was a grandfather's clock, a spinning-wheel, a home-made cradle, some chairs, a wheelbarrow, an ancient incubator and other "duffle," all piled up in one corner of the shop.

By ten o'clock, when the sale was advertised to begin, more than a hundred men, and a few women, had congregated in and around the shop. Some of the rigs of those from out of town were in neighboring barns, while others — the horses well blanketed — were strung along the road.

Although the season was early winter, with snow everywhere, it was not very cold, and the bright sunshine made it a cheerful scene.

Dabney Todd got up on a heavy box behind the

anvil, so that he was elevated about a foot above the others. Amos was by his side to act as clerk, and two or three young men, volunteers, brought forward such small things as could be carried when Dabney asked for them.

“Now, gentlemen,” he began, “all the contents of this shop are to be sold without reserve, and everybody is free to bid.”

“I reckon the bids air about the only things as is free, ain’t they, Dab?” grinned Spencer Howe.

“No,” flashed back Dabney. “There’ll be a free lunch, an’ you’ll git a good feed that some one else will pay for. That had oughta attract *you!*”

The laugh at Deacon Howe’s expense set the proceedings off in the good humor that meant lively bidding. Dabney knew that a joke to start with was calculated to arouse the sporting spirit that would enable him to get good prices.

“The first thing to be sold, gentlemen, is the forge. Everythin’ goes with it — fire-box, water tank, chimbley, shovels, pokers, bellows — an’ boy. I won’t let you pay for the boy. He’ll be throwed in. Blow up the fire, Benny, and let ’em see how well the bellows work.”

Benny pumped away at the bellows, and the fire roared up the chimney, sending a comfortable red

glare over the laughing faces of the men crowded around the auctioneer, all dominated by what is probably one of the strongest of human emotions — the hope of getting something for nothing.

“There you are, gentlemen! The fire’s as clear as a trout stream and as steady at Tite Showell’s corncob pipe — an’ a dummed sight more useful.”

“I dunno ’bout that,” grumbled Titus. “You don’t know everything, Dabney!”

“No. If I did, I’d know why you don’t start biddin’ on this splendid forge. Come on! It’s got to be sold. Who’s goin’ to start before Benny Zepp drops dead? Did I hear you say fifty dollars, Paul Cuddeback?”

“No, you didn’t!” growled Paul. “What do I want bellerses for?”

“Your wife might use ’em to blow you out o’ bed in the mornin’, so that you’d do the milkin’, ’stid of her,” replied Dabney.

“Five dollars!” bid Mart Doover, the older.

“Ridiculous bids are not considered,” was Dabney’s rebuke. “Lemme hear a decent offer. That’s all I want.”

“Ten dollars!” came from a farmer in the background.

“Ten dollars! Almost as bad as five. But I’ll

take that bid. Ten dollars — ten dollars — ten dollars — fifteen — fifteen — fifteen dollars — fifteen — twenty — twenty — twenty — twenty-two — two — two — twenty-three — three!”

Dabney stopped, and picking up a hammer from the anvil, waved it belligerently.

“Blame me if this ain’t the worst crowd I ever had dealin’s with! Why, this forge cost two hundred dollars when it was new!”

“Yes, when it was *new*!” sarcastically from Tite Showell.

“Yes, an’ that’s a dummed sight more than you was wuth when you was new, Titus,” replied Dabney.

“No one would have gave two cents for *you*!”

This brought out a howl of derisive laughter, in the midst of which Dabney roared:

“Twenty-five I am bid. Who said thirty? Thirty it should be — thirty! See it sell! See it sell! Come on, somebody!”

“Thirty!” shouted a man from Redburn, a blacksmith.

This bid was raised by a rival blacksmith from Twelve Corners, and at last the forge was knocked down for forty-nine dollars. Dabney admitted afterward, to Nance Pelot, that it was more than he had expected, because the forge, like everything else

in the shop, had been second-hand when Joe had bought it.

He had just finished selling a few small lots when Nance and Lena Klumm, accompanied by Gabe Showell and Van Cuddeback, appeared in the doorway, carrying pails of hot coffee and baskets of sandwiches.

"It's twelve o'clock, gentlemen," announced Dabney. "The sale will begin again at one. Gabe Showell, put that can of coffee ag'in the fire over there, to keep warm. Good mornin', Nance! We are all glad to see you. Most on us is hungry, too."

He went home to get his own dinner, while the company fell upon the coffee and sandwiches with a will. Amid much chaffing and rough-and-ready interchange of rural witticisms, the lunch was consumed down to the ultimate crumb — for was it not gratis? And free lunch, whether at country auction or in a city bar-room, is always a center of attraction.

Nance had gathered up the baskets and pails, after the meal, and was on her way home with Lena Klumm, when she met Dabney going back to the shop.

"It looks as if we'd git more'n two hundred dollars out of the sale, Nance," he said. "I've got only a few more things to sell, an' the folks will bid

better, now they've had lunch. They allers do. They's nothin' more good-natured than a full stummick."

Pipes were going when Dabney mounted his box and smiled at the crowd.

"That's right, men! Smoke up! But don't forget that this here anvil in front o' me is one o' the old-fashioned kind, made when men knew what anvils was, an' when they put only the best metal in 'em. Why, this anvil knows its business so well you don't have to think how you're goin' to fix up a shoe on it. Jest leave it to the anvil. It's a jim-slicker, I'm tellin' ye. Who's the lucky man as is goin' to git it? They's only one of 'em, remember. I could sell twenty if I had 'em. But you'll have to bid ag'in each other for this. . . . What's that? *Two dollars?*"

He shrieked the last two words, with a horrified expression on his ruddy face and a flash in his eyes.

"Deacon Howe, I don't know how you can look me in the face, as a ree-ligious man, an' bid two dollars for an anvil like this. Say! Ain't you afeerd somethin' will happen to you?"

"Two dollars!" repeated Spencer Howe, stolidly.

"Very well!" came from Dabney, in sorrowful

accents. "Two dollars I'm bid. I'm sure you men won't allow such a sin to be perpetrated before you. Besides, you all want this splendid anvil. Go on! Two dollars bid — two dollars — two dollars! Cheaper'n a broom! See it sell! I've a notion to bid it in myself. An' I would if I didn't have all I want. Three dollars — four — four — four! Do I hear five — five — five? Four dollars is all I'm gittin'! But it's gotta be sold. Four dollars — four — four!"

His keen eyes swept the faces around him. Then he brought the hammer down on the anvil with a savage ring, and shouted:

"Sold for four dollars to Deacon Howe! What's the next lot, Amos?"

In another half hour Dabney had cleaned up the blacksmith shop, and begun on the articles sent in by outside people.

A man with black eyes and beard, who had come from Redburn, edged to the front as an old mahogany table, every leg loose and the drawer falling crazily out of place, was held up by Amos. He was a furniture dealer, a Hebraic friend of the shyster lawyer, "Jewfish" Rosenblatt, who had come out to the sale to look for antiques. He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously at the table, and would

have turned up his nose if it had been that kind of nose. But he could not prevent his sharp eyes gleaming covetously as they fell on the treasure which, if he could only get his hands on it, would net him a fine profit.

"Here's a table — er — in good condition, solid mahogany," opened Dabney, looking the table over doubtfully. "It's jest the thing to have by your bed if you're sick an' it would look well in the settin'-room if it was oiled up a little."

"The legs is crooked," commented Paul Cuddeback.

"Well, so's yours, Paul. But you ain't no worse on that account," retorted Dabney. "These here legs can easy be fixed. I dunno 'bout your'n. Jest a pot o' glue for the legs an' a couple wire nails for the drawer, an' the table's as good as new. What will you gimme for it?"

"Fifty cents!" grunted Link Watkins.

"Fifty cents!" repeated Dabney, stentoriously. "Fifty cents for this here table. Make it seventy-five! Do I hear seventy-five? Ah! Mr. Isaacs," to the man with the black eyes and Yiddish nose. "You bid seventy-five! Seventy-five for the table. Any more?"

There was silence, and a gratified grin crept over

the seamed face of the bidder, as he fumbled in his pocket for the seventy-five cents, when another voice arose:

“ One dollar ! ”

Isaacs turned swiftly. He recognized the voice as that of a rival dealer, who knew antiques as well as himself.

“ Two dollars ! ” bawled Isaacs.

“ Three ! ”

“ Four ! ”

“ Five ! ”

“ Ten ! ”

Dabney Todd was delighted, although he tried to hide his satisfaction by shouting sternly:

“ This table is wuth two hundred dollars, if it's wuth a cent. They's people in New York would give a thousand dollars for sech a rare antique as this. An' I'm bid only ten dollars ! ”

It was finally knocked down to Isaacs' rival for twenty-one dollars, and Dabney, with a hopeful smile, ordered Amos to get somebody to help him bring out “ that there val'able grandfather's clock.”

But the clock was only an imitation antique, and Isaacs bid it in for what Dabney protested was less than the pendulum was worth.

The other things went at fair prices, according to

Dabney's estimate, until he came to the last lot — a huddle of old books in a clothes-basket.

"Now, here's some books!" announced Dabney, picking up one of the volumes, which proved to be an old annual report of the State Board of Health. "They're all good books. I dunno jest what they're all about, but they're mighty fine readin' for winter nights. They's twenty or more, and they must weigh all of fifteen pounds. What am I bid for these here books? They all gotta be sold, an' they all go together in one lot. Who wants these here books? Fifteen or sixteen pounds of 'em, an' some on 'em has picters all through."

"Twenty-five cents!" squeaked Tite Showell.

"Seventy-five!" bid Lije Conklin.

"One dollar!" said Hazel Devine, who had just arrived, after school. "But I should like to know what they are. Are they works one could take into the home? In purchasing literature, one should always be careful to acquire only that which is instructive to the intellect and uplifting to the spirit."

"I can't tell you that, Hazel, 'cause I don't know," replied Dabney. "But some on 'em is gilt-edged, an' I think there's po'try in one or two."

There was no more bidding, and the books became the property of Hazel Devine for a dollar.

“ One buys such trash at these auctions, you know really,” she remarked to Nona Haynes. “ At all events, I felt it my duty to purchase them, in the sacred name of literature.”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DOUBLE CROSS

A GREAT drama was being enacted in Nance Pelot's little home that afternoon. Like the third act of a gripping play, the stage was set for a powerful climax.

Brewster was there, ready to sign a contract with Nance that guaranteed all Dabney had demanded for her. At last the girl was face to face with actual wealth, and her manner showed the tension she was under. After a life of grinding poverty, worry and trouble, of labor, scrimping and petty calculations, the sudden turn of fortune now at hand all but stunned her.

Dabney, glowing with pride for his part in the business, and very proud of the girl by his side, saw her at last sailing into quiet waters.

Brewster and Nance listened very gravely as he read the agreement over.

Then, as he finished, and arose to call Neevey to witness the signing of it, came an interruption, as

melodramatic as the entrance of the villain in a play. It could not have been more inopportune.

Dabney slid back into his seat, stunned, his eyes staring, at sight of Larry Shayne striding toward him.

"Well!" cried he. "What do *you* want?"

The excitement shining in Shayne's face told that he must have hurried; and the relief in his eyes, as he saw the contract lying before Brewster, still unsigned, was only too obvious.

For weeks past he had been brooding over the fiasco Martin had made of his plans.

Larry had been close to murder the day Martin had come back to him, with his furtive, bloodshot eyes and battered face.

The money was gone and they had nothing to show for it.

Mart had made up his mind that Larry should never see it again.

Five hundred dollars was a gigantic sum for him, and he knew that it would take him far from Redburn and New Canaan. Right then, distance was an absorbing topic in Mart's mind. He was ready to kill, if necessary, to keep that money, and his clumsy brain had struggled for hours before it had hit upon a story that would disarm Larry Shayne.

This determined on, he had trusted to his natural stubbornness to stick to it, and all that Larry had been able to get out of him was that Joe had taken the money and signed the note. Then, so he asseverated, before he had been able to get away, Chet Todd had rushed in upon him. Afraid to be caught with the evidence, and with a long term in jail staring him in the face, Doover declared he had thrown the note into the fire.

His appearance and the graphic way he had described the fight had made his story ring true — and what little cunning Martin possessed had led him to dwell upon Nance, standing there in the doorway, as he had picked himself up.

Once out of any great danger from Larry's vengeance for having bungled the scheme, Doover had dropped out of sight and had left town while the leaving was good. The baffled anger of Larry Shayne had constantly increased as the weeks had passed, and he had turned over in his mind scheme after scheme to get some return for his money.

Joe Pelot's death had gone a long way toward giving him some definite mode of attack. Time enough had passed for Chet and Nance to have acted, if they had had anything on him, and now Joe's death had left him free to do as he pleased.

He wondered what was to prevent him from producing a note with Joe's signature scrawled across it. The manner of obtaining the original need not be brought in now, and who was there to question, if it were.

Sitting in his room, night after night, he copied the name " Joseph Pelot " from an old I O U given for drinks over the bar.

His indecision would never have carried him anywhere had not the news that Nance Pelot was going to receive her money that afternoon, come to him fresh on the heels of another bitter tilt with his father.

In a fit of anger he took the plunge, and, getting into his car, burned up the miles between Redburn and New Canaan, wondering if he could get there in time to block the deal.

He knew Brewster well enough to understand that he would not close the business with a claim of any kind hanging over the farm, which might mean years of litigation afterward. If the money had been turned over to Nance, and the contract consummated, it would be an easy matter for her to return his five hundred. But he wanted more than that. To hurt Nance, and square his account with Chet Todd, were the principal motives that now led him on.

The amazement his advent caused was a sop to his vanity.

He nodded knowingly to Brewster.

"Got here just in time, I guess," he said, excitedly. "I reckon when I get through with my little speech, you won't be half so keen about signing your name to that bit of paper."

"Where do you come in on this?" Brewster asked, defiantly.

"That's what we all would like to know, Mr. Brewster," said Nance.

"This creature has been hounding me, about my farm, for almost a year. And now he has the effrontery to come here!"

"You want to go easy with your names," Shayne blurted out. "I've got a little document that's going to surprise you."

And he held the forged note up to view.

"Here, Brewster! You know a bona fide note when you see it. Listen to this!"

And he read it aloud.

"It's dated, too — September twentieth," he pointed. "And it's legally witnessed. Now before this farm is sold, I want my money. The note's overdue, and if I can't get the money, I'm going to sit down on this lease until I get a look in. Now,

what are you going to do about it?" And with an ugly grin he peered at Nance.

Dabney and Brewster turned to her inquiringly.

"Why, my father never had five hundred dollars!" cried she. "There hasn't been a single time in the last two years when he's had that amount of money. It would have been a fortune, for him. If he'd had it, I most certainly would have known about it, and he never said a single word to me, in the matter."

Happiness had seemed so near; and now this man, who had done so much to make her miserable, was snatching it out of her very hands! Her good fortune had been too great. She knew she should not have counted on it so certainly. Its loss would now be more than she could bear.

She turned to Dabney; but that sage philosopher, for once, was silent.

"You know your father's signature when you see it. Does this look like it?" cried Shayne, triumphantly.

He thrust the note before her eyes. All Nance could do was to answer: "Yes."

"Why, Brewster," Shayne continued, "I loaned Joe Pelot this money, because I liked his girl, and because I wanted to stay close to this farm for you. I

ain't forgetting that you kidded me into believing you wanted it for a country club. Country club, hell! But you got to see me, now."

Brewster turned despairingly to Nance.

"I guess he's right, Miss Pelot. I don't feel like going ahead, with the likelihood of a lot of litigation staring us in the face."

"You mean," she cried, "that you are going to take back your offer?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to — at least, until this note is taken care of. I don't want you to feel badly about this man's statement that we tried to buy the farm in as a site for a country club. That's business."

Nance saw her world falling in on her. Were there no such things as honesty and truth and righteousness in it?

Chet had been engaged to drive Brewster over to Redburn, as soon as the business relative to the farm had been put through; and now he arrived in his biggest car. When Larry Shayne saw him coming, it was the happiest moment of his life. At last they two were going to be face to face. Larry wanted to see him help the girl now, if he could.

Chet realized in a glance that something had gone wrong. Nance's pale and worried look, Dabney's

glumness, and the presence of Larry Shayne, all spoke eloquently of trouble.

Cock-sure as Shayne was, he weakened under the glint in Chet's eyes. For, though Chet addressed himself to all of them, it was at Larry Shayne he stared.

Quickly Nance told him Shayne's mission, clinging to the arm that tightened like steel springs as she went on.

Dabney saw the red creeping into Chet's eyes, and made as though to hold him in check.

"For my sake, Chet!" Nance begged. "Not here! He isn't worth it!"

In spite of them, Chet, because of his great strength, put them aside and confronted Shayne.

"Let's see that note!" he demanded.

Shayne held back. He was not going to risk having it in any one's hands but his own.

"These people have seen it," he retorted. "Nance admits it's her father's signature. You can't bully me into passing it over for your inspection."

"I give you fair warning you'd better let me see it," came the menacing answer.

Shayne felt Chet's hand on his arm; his tortured flesh cringed under the grip of those mighty fingers.

Slowly they closed, until the pain made Larry wince.

"I won't ask you again," Chet growled. Larry knew the bones of his arm were breaking. Then, and not until then, did he reach for the note.

Once Chet had it, he carefully folded it away in his wallet with rage-distorted face. Shayne watched him.

"Now, you hound, listen to me!"

Chet's voice was that of a man not to be trifled with.

"You've overplayed the game for once. When thieves fall out, some one gets burned, and you're in for the singeing of your life. I'm going to put that note in a safe deposit box, and laugh at you every time I see you. You get me, I guess?"

Larry grimaced with rage and hate, but found no answer.

Then Chet spoke to them all.

"Folks," said he, "I'm going to tell you something that's caused my mother a lot of worry, and if it gets out it will make Link Watkins hate himself."

Carefully he recounted the events of that night in Nance's kitchen.

"And when it was all over," he concluded, "I took the paper I'd seen Joe signing, out of Mart's

pocket. It was a twin to the one you saw just now. Nance had troubles enough of her own, and I didn't want her to know. I must have stood there ten minutes before I decided what to do. Then I stuffed the bills back in Martin's clothes, and, while he still lay on the floor, I tore up that note piece by piece, and dropped the pieces in the fire."

Larry Shayne's white-livered face burned crimson. A half-wit like Mart Doover had beaten him at his own game! The thought was gall and wormwood to his nature which, easily tolerating any form of corruption, could not for one instant bear defeat.

"Am I telling the truth, Nance, as far as you know?" Chet asked. She confirmed him.

"Why, Mr. Brewster," cried Chet, passionately, "this man's got no more claim on that farm than I have!"

"This is forgery!" Brewster ejaculated. "He's liable, under the law, for a ten-year sentence. Do you realize that?" Brewster was mad all the way through. "We can't let him leave here without an officer. I don't care who he is, or what he is. He's broken the law, and has got to pay for it."

"Say, Mr. Brewster," put in Chet, "you let me take the law into my own hands, this once. He's muzzled himself better than I could have done, if I'd

tried all my life. In about two minutes he's going to be beating it back to Redburn and the old he-wolf who begot him. They ain't a bite left in his whole system."

Chet had his way, and Larry Shayne passed out. New Canaan had become too warm for him.

Chet being present, there was no need of calling his mother, and the contracts were quickly signed.

"Better hurry up, Mr. Brewster," Chet laughed, as Nance smiled through misty eyes. "We haven't got much time, and there's a long, cold road ahead of us. Come on!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

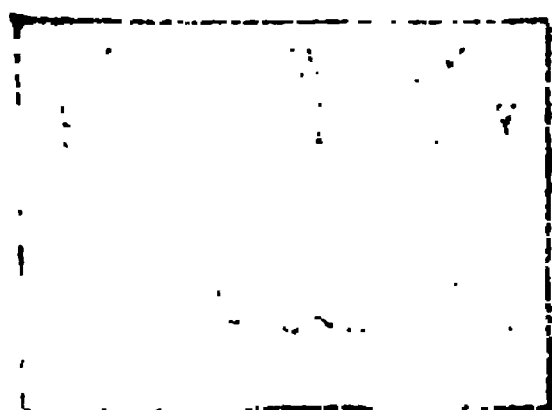
SANCTUARY

SEVERAL days after Larry Shayne had said his farewell to New Canaan, Blake, watching Nance and Chet walking home from church, felt a great vacancy in his own heart because he had been denied the happiness he knew was so surely in store for them.

Nance Pelot was rich now, but there was little danger it would make any great difference in her. The Rev. Mr. Blake remembered the day, so long past, when he had sat in her cozy little parlor and wondered what life would bring her. The world was unfolding now, and the silent man watching her was strangely happy in her good fortune.

It was a time of fulfillment for Nance and Chet. The evening before, Chet had come upon her standing alone before the fire. Words had grown needless now. Silently Chet had taken her in his arms, crushed her to him and kissed her willing lips, even as

TOGETHER THEY SAT DOWN, HAND IN HAND BEFORE THE
FIREPLACE, WATCHING THE SPUTTERING FLAME, SYMBOL OF
THE HOME-LIFE AND THE RACE-LIFE FROM ALL THE AGES
PAST AND TO ALL THE AGES STILL TO COME.



she had dreamed he would. It was the beginning of the world for them. And Nance found it almost impossible to open her eyes, so wonderful was the land of enchantment spread out before her.

And he — big, loving boy that he was — caressed her hair and eyes, and felt her warm young body close to his.

Together they sat down, hand in hand, before the fireplace, watching the sputtering flame, symbol of the home-life and the race-life from all the ages past and to all the ages still to come.

Presently she spoke to him, her voice strangely tremulous.

“Chet!” she whispered, “you’ll always love me, won’t you? Always? Always?”

Chet’s strong arm, round her, and his cheek against hers, gave her all the answer she needed. Not eloquent in words was Chet; his was the larger eloquence of deeds.

“We’ve got the long straight road ahead of us, dear, and we’ll be home soon; but not here!” said Nance, at last. “I want to start all over again somewhere. There would be too many memories in this little place and that would not be our memories. Where it will be doesn’t matter, but we’ll make it a little home of real happiness, won’t we, Chet?”

“ Yes,” he replied, “ and we’ll build our own little home. When the snow goes I’ll take you up on Storm King, where I used to lie in the grass and dream of you. You can see the smoke curlin’ out of the chimneys from there, and when the sun goes down, you can see it long after it’s said good-night to folks down here. There’s birds and wild flowers, too. Somehow everythin’ seems glad to be alive up there! ”

And so it was decided, and early spring found the little home taking shape. The robins and bluebirds watched, with startled eyes, the strangers who had come to their abode.

By this time Brewster was already making progress at the farm, and gangs of men were breaking ground for the railroad that now came curling up from the south.

Dabney and Neevy found a great solace in each other, these days. The little romance that was unfolding robbed them only to enrich them; and, for the first time in years, the old man found no work to take him away in the evening.

It was good to have brought up a son and a daughter like Nance and Chet. The trials and hardships seemed so worth while now!

"Saw Cash Bailey to-day, mother," Dabney confided to Neevey, one day.

"No!"

"Yes! Cash says he furnishes homes as easy as he does advice, an' he's on hand to git the order of his life."

"Well, rememberin' some things, I guess he's sure goin' to git it," answered his mother, her eyes glistening with tears of happiness behind her gold-bowed spectacles, as she took her big boy in her arms and gave him a kiss that was a benediction and a prayer.

THE END





